



HILDA *and the*
WISHES

HARRY THURSTON PECK



Hilda and the Wishes



Hilda saves
the Elf.

Hilda and the Wishes

By
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"The Adventures of Mabel"

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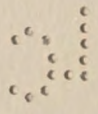
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To
ALL THE CHILDREN
who
are fond of Mabel
this book
is affectionately dedicated

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I

HOW HILDA GOT HER NAME

PERHAPS you have heard of a little girl named Mabel, who lived in a cottage with her Grandma and her brother Walter and Jane the cook. If you have, then you know how she came to understand animal-talk and to whistle the Call which made all animals kind to her, and you will remember her adventures with the Good Wolf, and Rex, and the great giant Cormoran, and the giant's daughter Elsie, and the Brownies in the Brownie Cave. Her Grandma's cottage, you know, was quite a long way from the village where Mabel and Rex caught the robbers, and where the Judge questioned Mabel about them, and where all the Policemen saluted her with their clubs.

Well, just outside that same village, there

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stood a large house with trees all around it and a lawn in front and another lawn behind it. At the time when Mabel had her first adventure, there was born in this house a little baby girl, whose father and mother were very proud of her. They used to have the nurse bring her down to the broad verandah in a small, white, fluffy bundle; and then they would lay her in the big hammock and let her swing ever so gently back and forth in the soft summer breeze while they both sat there and watched her. She was a very pretty baby and never cried, but just made little coos when they patted her; and though she was so very little, she seemed to love the sun and the blue sky and the green leaves, and to smile as she lay in the hammock and looked at the world out of her baby eyes.

One day when the three were there together, the baby's father said:

“Well, Edith, don't you think the baby ought to be christened pretty soon? She

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really hasn't any name yet—only just Baby, and Darling, and Kitten. Before long she must have a real name all to herself."

"Yes," said the mother, who looked just a little troubled.

"Of course," he went on, "I should like to call her Edith after you; only I don't want there to be any other Edith except you. And there are lots of pretty names for girls."

The baby's mother did not answer, but looked still more troubled. He did not notice this, and kept on talking.

"Amy is a very pretty name, don't you think? And so is Mildred. And so are Claire and Ethel and Lily and Madeleine and Helen. Or, if you like names that are a little old-fashioned, why not call her Ruth, or Grace, or Esther? You know it's rather odd that you haven't said anything about giving her a name, though she's nearly four months old now."

Still the mother said nothing; and then he

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turned to her and noticed that her face was very serious and that she had something on her mind.

“Why, what is it, dear?” he asked quickly.
“Is anything the matter?”

She looked up and then told him what she had been thinking about all the while.

“I’m afraid you won’t like it,” she said;
“but you remember how my father and mother both died when I was a little girl, and how I was brought up by my aunt?”

“Of course I remember *that*,” he said.
“You were brought up by your Aunt Maria.”

“Yes,” she answered; “and Aunt Maria was good to me in her way. I wasn’t always happy with her, but she meant to be kind, and, of course, I am grateful to her. That is why I made her a promise when I was married—she asked it so hard that I had to. I couldn’t refuse.”

“Dear me!” said he. “What promise? You never told me.”

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“No,” she replied. “I didn’t like to. She made me promise that if I had a baby-girl, I would name it after her.”

“Good gracious! Do you mean that Baby has got to be called Maria?”

“Yes, I think she really must be, for I promised. Perhaps it was foolish of me, but Aunt Maria would have been quite angry if I hadn’t. And if Baby had been a boy, then the promise wouldn’t matter.”

He got up out of his deck-chair and walked around the verandah several times.

“Well!” said he at last. “It’s rather awful. I don’t want Baby’s name to remind me of your Aunt Maria all the time. I don’t care very much for your Aunt Maria.”

“She is a very good woman,” said the young mother in a doubting sort of way.

“Oh, yes, she’s *good*,” said he; “but she’s not very pleasant. She talks to you as if you were still a child, and when she comes here she acts as if she owned the house. And I

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don't fancy the name anyhow. It doesn't suit Baby at all!"

His voice sounded almost angry; but as he looked around he saw that there were tears in his wife's eyes. All at once he stopped walking up and down and went to her and took her hand.

"There, there, dear," he said; "forgive me. It's all right. We must keep the promise. Baby shall be christened Maria, and if we don't like the name, we can go on calling her Baby or Darling just the same as we do now."

"You don't really mind?" asked she, timidly.

"No, no," said he, laughing. "Anything that you want. And I'll arrange to have the christening next week, and invite your Aunt Maria to come and see it done!"

And so it was settled that the baby was to be christened Maria.

When the day for the christening arrived, it was bright and sunny—just the day for

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christening so beautiful a baby. At ten o'clock in the morning Aunt Maria came across the lawn. She had walked from the railway station and was very warm and out of breath. She was a large, stout woman; and the walk in the sun had made her face quite red. She wore a purple dress and had a small round hat with a red feather in it. When she reached the verandah she stopped to wipe her face with a pink silk handkerchief.

"Oh, how do you do, Aunt Maria?" said the baby's mother, coming down the steps and kissing her.

"I'm not well at all," said Aunt Maria in a short, wheezy voice. "I had the ear-ache all last night. And now I've walked miles in the broiling sun!"

"It's only half a mile to the station," said her niece; "and we would have sent a carriage for you if you had let us know what train you were coming on. Why didn't you take a cab?"

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"I never take cabs!" answered Aunt Maria. "I don't believe they're clean. And they charge you twenty-five cents for that little distance!"

Aunt Maria forgot that she had at first said it was miles. Presently she took a seat on the verandah and began rocking hard in a big chair.

The baby's father shook hands with her and thanked her for coming to the christening.

"Of course I came," said Aunt Maria. "Did you think I'd stay away? Where's the child?"

"There she is, in the hammock. Doesn't she look sweet?"

"Good gracious!" cried Aunt Maria. "Do you mean to say that you let her lie there right in a draught? She'll get cold and die in twenty-four hours! Edith, I thought you had more sense! But I see you're just the same as ever. You need me to come and stay

with you awhile to train you and see that things are properly done.”

“But she lies in the hammock every day,” said the mother. “And she’s never had a single cold yet.”

Aunt Maria sniffed, and went on rocking.

“What a ridiculous way to dress the child!” she said after a minute or two. “All that white material soils so easily. And real lace, too! *I* should put her in a good plain calico wrap that wouldn’t need to be washed every two minutes. If you begin to pamper the child in that way, you’ll spoil her before she cuts a tooth!—Where’s she to be christened?” she asked all of a sudden.

“Oh, in the church opposite, at twelve o’clock. It’s where we go, and it’s so near that we can walk across the green—just the four of us.”

“Well!” said Aunt Maria, who was now growing cooler. “That’s convenient. I’m glad there’s not going to be any fuss. I hate

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fussing. I never fuss myself. You remember your promise, Edith, about the name?"

"Oh, yes," said her niece. "She is to be called Maria, after you."

"It's a good, strong name," said Aunt Maria. "And you'll naturally be proud to remember always that it's *my* name, too. I hope she'll grow up to be like me. I've brought up five children besides you, Edith; and, if I do say it, I'm a master hand at training them. I suppose I'm to be the god-mother as long as I let the child have my name?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so."

"Well, then, you'd better tell the clergyman, so that when he says 'Name this child,' he will look at *me*. Then I'll name it."

"Very well," said the baby's father. "I'll tell him."

So just at noon they walked slowly across the green to the church. The baby was carried in her father's arms, and as they went

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slowly up the broad aisle the clergyman came out into the chancel and stood beside the marble font to meet them. It was a fine old church of dark grey stone, all covered with ivy. Inside it was cool and still. Here and there a shaft of sunlight shone through the beautiful painted windows and was changed to rich red or to yellow gold.

The baby's father and mother, with Aunt Maria, stood before the font, and the clergyman began the service. After he had prayed, and had read out of a little book, he leaned forward and took the baby from her mother. The little thing lay quietly in his arms and smiled up into his kindly face. Then he turned to Aunt Maria and said:

“Name this child.”

Aunt Maria was very much flustered because she felt that she was so important. She gasped, and was just going to answer, when a strange, clear voice behind them said in the stillness:

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"Her name is Hilda!"

Everyone turned quickly around to see who had spoken. They saw a lady standing close behind them and looking at the baby. It was no one whom they had ever seen before. She was tall and very graceful, with dark hair, and two wonderful great eyes that seemed to glow and gleam like some strange kind of jewels. She was dressed all in grey—a sort of silvery grey that shimmered in the dim light. The clergyman was the most surprised of all, for he had been looking straight before him all the time and yet he had not seen her there before she spoke. Aunt Maria stared and grew red in the face. Then the lady said again in her clear voice:

"Her name is Hilda."

Aunt Maria gave a great heave and fairly puffed with anger.

"Woman!" she said.

But the lady just looked at Aunt Maria. Only one look out of her wonderful eyes—

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yet it made Aunt Maria shrink back afraid. She could not bear the look, it was so strange and piercing. So she kept still. The clergyman said once more:

“Name this child.”

This time he looked at the baby's father and not at Aunt Maria. But it was the tall lady who spoke for the third time:

“Her name is Hilda.”

It was so still that you could hear Aunt Maria breathe hard. But finally she spoke in a voice as though she were saying a lesson which she didn't like:

“Yes; her name is Hilda.”

Then the clergyman went on with the service, and the baby was christened Hilda.

When it was all done, everybody drew a long breath and turned to the tall lady. She seemed even taller and more majestic than ever; but she smiled at them and they saw that she was very beautiful. Hilda's father spoke to her.

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“May I ask, madam,” said he, “to what we owe the honour of your presence?”

“Yes;” she answered. “I am a Fairy, and once in every hundred years I choose a girl-child for my god-daughter. Now I have chosen yours, and you may well be glad; for I shall bring her everything that is good. Only, it is my right to name her, and I have named her Hilda.”

Aunt Maria was still staring, and now she gave a little grunt.

But the Fairy paid no attention to her. She leaned forward to where the baby lay in the arms of her mother, who had once more taken her.

“You shall be good and brave and true,” she said; “for goodness and courage and truth are the best things in the world. And when you are eighteen years of age I shall come to you again. Until that time you shall not see me; but things will happen to you that do not happen to other children.”

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Then she bent low over the baby's face and touched its forehead with her lips. Again the baby smiled, and lifting her little hands she stroked the Fairy's face.

"And now," said the Fairy, "I shall give you a christening gift that can be seen."

She raised her hand, and in it was a long rod that looked like frosted silver. No one had noticed it before. With it she touched the baby's left hand. As she did so a light streamed from the end of the wand. Then they all saw that on the baby's fourth finger there was a tiny ring—oh, such a tiny ring! And in it was a tiny jewel that gleamed like a little ray of the light that had shone from the end of the wand. Then the Fairy looked them all in the face once more, and they felt the power of her eyes.

"I know," she said, "that you do not quite believe that I am a Fairy. But I will give you proof. You see me here? Then watch me—all of you—very closely."

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They all looked hard at her as she stood before them—at her shimmering dress and her dark hair and her great eyes—and then, while they looked they all gave a sudden cry—for she wasn't there! She had vanished! Hilda's father thought he saw, just for a second, a faint shape melting in the air—but was not sure, and it was gone before he really knew.

They looked at each other in silence. No one knew what to say. Even Aunt Maria was silent. So the clergyman closed his book and shook hands with everybody and went away; and the rest of them passed out of the church into the bright sunshine. But still they said nothing about the Fairy. It all seemed so impossible. They could not believe their own eyes and ears. But Hilda's father and mother were very happy in their hearts as they walked across the green to their own house.

“We have ordered a special luncheon for



The Fairy Disappears

the christening," said the mother to Aunt Maria.

"Very proper," said Aunt Maria, who was fond of eating.

And so they all went into the pretty dining-room where the table was set with ever so many dainty things, among great bowls of roses. Hilda's father was in high spirits. He laughed and sang bits of songs, and tossed Hilda up and down, and romped like a boy; for he felt that something very good had happened. Aunt Maria hardly spoke; but she was not very much out of sorts, as she ate five chicken patties, and half a lobster salad, besides cake and jam and popovers, and she drank four cups of green tea.

When she had finished, there was a carriage to take her to the station. She looked very much subdued, but she kissed the baby, and gave her a German-silver mug.

After she had gone, Hilda's mother sat

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down and drew a long breath. Then she asked:

“Well! What *do* you really think of it all?”

“Think?” said Hilda’s father. “Why, I don’t think at all. I just can’t. It’s too much for me. But, I say! I’m awfully glad the baby wasn’t named Maria!”

II

WHEN THE GREAT SNOW FELL

HILDA grew out of babyhood almost before her father and mother knew it. At first she was so small and pink and helpless that it made them laugh to think that she would ever be any bigger. They couldn't quite believe that she would ever learn to talk. But, as the days and weeks and months went quickly by, she changed without their really noticing it; because it all happened bit by bit. First of all, she came to know the different people whom she saw. Then she would no longer lie still in her pretty cradle, but was eager to creep about in the room. And she was so strong and sturdy that pretty soon, when she had crawled up to her father's feet as he sat watching her, she would take hold of him

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and hoist herself up until she stood on her own little feet beside him and laughed gleefully into his eyes. And after that, it was not long before she could walk alone, and go pattering about the house all day.

And then her cooings and gurgles changed into something like words, and finally into real words, though strangers were not always sure just what they meant, and did not know at once that "pukka" was sugar, and "i-keem," ice-cream; and that, when Hilda had eaten a piece of chocolate and sighed blissfully and said "oggon," she meant that it was all gone. But pretty soon she could say her words as other people said them, and could put them together into sentences, and then, all of a sudden, her father and mother said to each other: "Why, Hilda isn't a baby any more!"

They never spoke of the Fairy. Somehow or other they felt unwilling to do so, although they couldn't have told you why. It

was so strange that they found it very hard to believe, and yet—and yet they had both seen her, and heard her speak, and watched her vanish away. And there was the ring which she had placed on Hilda's finger. Hilda's mother used to say to herself when Hilda was still a tiny thing:

“Very soon this ring will be too small for Baby's finger. As she grows, the ring will be so tight that I shall have to take it off. Then I shall be pretty sure that, after all, the lady was not a Fairy, but only a kind and rather friendly person who just made believe.”

But then, as Hilda grew and grew, the ring never became too small. The baby's hands were at first just two wee bits of warm, pink flesh, and the fingers were so very tiny that you could scarcely separate them and count them. Yet, when the hands had grown into real hands, sturdy and strong and graceful, and each finger was ever so much larger

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than at first, the ring still fitted perfectly. It, too, was larger, and the beautiful gem in it gleamed and glowed and sparkled when the light fell on it, and even in the dark it gave out a soft blur of brightness.

One day Hilda's mother was so curious about the ring that she wanted very much to slip it off and look at it very closely. Yet she felt that she ought not to do so, for in some way it seemed as if she didn't have the right, or that something might happen to Hilda if she removed the ring, even for a minute.

Still, she said to herself:

"I won't take it off, but I'll just slip it down to the tip of the finger so that I can peep inside the gold hoop and see if anything is engraved there."

So she took the baby's hand and tried to slip the ring partly down her finger. But, to her surprise, it wouldn't move at all—not even a hair's breadth, and when she tried

harder it was just the same. She could not stir the ring. So she kissed the little finger, and stopped trying. But it made her wonder all the more.

A few months later, something else happened. Hilda's nurse had to be away for a whole day, because her sister was going to be married; and so another nurse came in to take her place. This girl's name was Lena, and she was a pleasant enough girl, with sleek black hair and a quiet way of moving about. But her eyes were small and sly, and she never looked anybody in the face.

However, she took such good care of Hilda, and knew so well just what to do, that toward evening Hilda's mother left her in charge of the child for an hour or two, until Alice, the regular nurse, should come back. No one else was in the house at the time; and so Lena took the baby into the library and sat there with her, singing softly.

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to her until Hilda fell fast asleep in the waning light.

Now, as Lena rocked the child and bent over her, she suddenly noticed the ring that was shining on the small finger. Out of it came sparkles like red and blue and golden fire.

“Golly!” said Lena to herself as she stopped singing. “I’ll bet that’s a diamond!”

She lifted the hand and held it up. A last sliver of sunlight darted in at the window and fell full upon the ring. At once the gem, as though struck into a cascade of fire, glittered with a thousand tiny sparks.

“It *is* a diamond!” repeated Lena, looking at it greedily. “It ain’t a big one, but I guess it’s fine. I never seen anything like that on a baby’s hand before.”

Now, Lena was kind to children and knew how to take good care of them, but she was not honest, and for more than a year had

been a thief. She had never yet stolen anything very valuable from the families in which she had been a nurse; but she had taken ribbons, and handkerchiefs, and bits of lace, and people had suspected her and sent her away, so that she did not stay very long in any one place. This time she found herself with what she thought was a diamond ring, and she was greatly tempted to steal it. There was nobody in the house; and the longer she looked at the beautiful gem, the more she wanted it. Precious stones have a strange power over the minds of many people, and make them willing to do almost anything to get these wonderful jewels. So Lena looked and longed, and at last she thought to herself:

“I can slip this ring off just before Alice comes. No one will notice that it is gone until I have left the house, and then they can't be sure that I took it. They will think that it fell off—and the baby can't tell.”

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She looked around in a sly, stealthy way. Just then she heard steps on the walk outside.

"It's Alice," she said. "I must take it now."

So she laid Hilda among the cushions on the couch, and quickly grasped the hand on which the ring was sparkling. She seized it in her fingers and gave the ring a swift, sharp pull. All at once a scorching pain, like that from a red-hot coal, ran through her fingers and into her hand and up her arm. It burned and stung so that she sprang to her feet and gave a loud cry. Just then the door opened and Hilda's mother walked into the room.

"What is the matter, Lena?" she asked.

"Oh, my fingers! They're burnt!" cried Lena, putting them in her mouth, and dancing with the pain.

Hilda's mother looked down at the baby, whose little hand was lying stretched out.

Upon it the ring was gleaming; but, instead of many colours, it was now all a bright and angry red. Hilda's mother turned quickly to the girl beside her.

"What have you been doing to the ring?" she asked in a short, sharp voice. "Have you tried to take it off?"

"N-n-n-o!" sobbed Lena, who was no longer in pain, but who was frightened. "I—I—was only turning it around on baby's hand."

"Well, you may go now. I wish you to leave at once. I will take care of Hilda until Alice comes."

"Yes, ma'am," said Lena, very glad to get off so easily. And a moment later she was hurrying down the steps of the verandah and off to the railway station. Hilda, on the couch, woke up and smiled sleepily as she saw her mother bending over her.

The very next day Hilda's mother took her to a great city many miles distant. They

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went by the train, and Alice was with them to carry Hilda, who was already growing very heavy. When they reached the city they were driven in a carriage to a jeweller's—the most famous jeweller's in the whole country. It was a magnificent place, with an immense entrance and men in uniform to open the doors; and inside in long crystal cases there were thousands upon thousands of every kind of precious stone. Hilda's mother went straight to a little room at one end of the first floor, and asked to see the head jeweller. Pretty soon he came in and closed the door. He had spent all his life collecting, and studying, and setting jewels, and he knew more about them than anybody else.

“What can I do for you, Madam?” said the head jeweller, turning to Hilda's mother. He did not like to be sent for, because he was a very busy man; but he was too polite to say so.

"I have called to ask you to examine the stone in a ring on my daughter's hand," said Hilda's mother.

The head jeweller was a little annoyed.

"Very well," said he. "Please take the ring off."

Hilda's mother hesitated a moment.

"I—I—can't take it off," she said. "It seems too tight, and it would make baby cry to pull it hard."

"Oh, very well!" said the head jeweller. "Only in that case, you know, it'll *have* to be taken off pretty soon."

"Yes, perhaps," said Hilda's mother, with a little smile. "But, just for to-day, would you mind looking at it while it is on her hand?"

The head jeweller leaned over and lifted Hilda's hand, and looked at the ring in a careless sort of way. Then all of a sudden he started and gave a kind of gasp. He stared at the ring with all his eyes. A mo-

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ment later, he took a strange-looking magnifying glass from his pocket, and through it he peered at the gem in the ring. Pretty soon he went out and got another kind of glass and screwed it into one of his eyes. All the time he kept making little grunts and funny sounds of surprise as he went on gazing. Finally he leaned back in his chair and drew a long breath.

“Well,” said Hilda’s mother, “what is it?”

“Madam,” replied the head jeweller, “I don’t know what it is. At first I thought it was a diamond, and then I thought it was an opal; but it is really neither of them, and it is more beautiful than both of them together. Never in my life have I seen or heard of such a gem as this. May I ask where it came from?”

“Oh,” said Hilda’s mother, “it was a present to the baby from her godmother.”

“Wonderful! Most astonishing!” said

the head jeweller: "It must be the only one of its kind in the world. It is priceless! And let me tell you something else: The ring in which it is set looks to you like gold, does it not?"

"Yes, of course. I have always supposed that it was gold."

"But it isn't. It looks like gold, but it is not gold, nor is it silver, or platinum, or any other metal that I ever heard of. Such a ring should be kept with the greatest care. Now, excuse me, but it ought not to be on a baby's finger. It might fall off, or someone might steal it."

"Oh," said Hilda's mother, smiling to herself, "I'm not afraid that it will drop off, or that anyone will steal it."

Then she thanked the head jeweller, who in his turn thanked her for letting him examine such a wonderful ring. But from that day Hilda's mother *knew* that the strange lady in silver-grey was really and

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truly a Fairy, and she thought very often of all that the Fairy had said of Hilda.

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Meanwhile Hilda was growing larger and stronger every day. She had beautiful dark hair and frank clear eyes, and she was so well that she never was ill for a single hour, even when her little white teeth were coming in. After she began to talk she was quick to notice everything, and would ask all sorts of wise questions, while she never forgot what people told her. And she was full of fun, and would play for hours with her father, pretending that she was hunting bears, or that she was a princess, or a gipsy, or sometimes even a barber.

One grey morning in November, when she was a little more than four years old, she was having breakfast, sitting in her high chair by her father, when the doorbell rang, and Aunt Maria came in. She had a shopping-bag in one hand, and was bundled

up in a long cloak. She seemed in a great hurry.

“Oh!” she said at once, without sitting down. “I want to see if Hilda can’t come over and spend the day with us. There is to be a—a little party. Just two or three children besides Clarence. I’m going to the city to do some shopping. I’ll not be gone long, but I don’t like to leave Clarence all alone—poor boy! So I’ve asked some other nice children to come in. They will have a special lunch and can play games together, and I want very much to have Hilda join them. I know that it will all help to amuse Clarence.”

Clarence was Aunt Maria’s youngest son. Hilda’s father smiled when he heard this invitation.

“Why,” he said, “it looks like a cold day—going to snow, maybe. Hilda couldn’t do much at home, and no doubt she would be glad to go. Would you, Hilda?”

“Ye-e-s,” answered Hilda rather slowly.

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She did not seem anxious about the party.

Aunt Maria eyed her rather sharply.

“You visit us very seldom, Hilda,” said she in a severe tone. “I should think you would be glad enough to spend the day with Clarence. If I *do* say it, he is a very remarkable boy—so bright and witty.”

So it was arranged that Hilda was to go, and it turned out that Aunt Maria expected Hilda's father to drive the child over to the party, since Aunt Maria herself was going straight to the city by the next train. As soon as this was settled, Aunt Maria hurried off to the railway station.

“Come on, Hilda!” said her father. “The buggy'll be ready in no time. Wrap yourself up well for the two-mile drive, for it's awfully cold. What's the matter? You don't look as though you wanted to go.”

“No, papa,” said Hilda. “I—I don't like Clarence very much.”

“Well, I don't wonder; but there'll be

other children there, and you needn't listen to Clarence all the time. Besides, it's true that you don't often go to Aunt Maria's, and I think she feels a little hurt."

So presently Hilda and her father were rattling over the frozen roads. Hilda looked like a kitten, she was so closely bundled up in her mother's long fur coat, out of which her rosy little face looked at the horse as he dashed along the way. Before the two-mile drive was ended a fine snow began to fall, at first quite thin, and then thicker, until, when Hilda was lifted out at Aunt Maria's cottage, the ground was already white, and the wind had begun to drive the snow into great swirling masses and to pile it into drifts.

"Well, good-bye, Hilda," called out her father as he blew a kiss to her and turned the horse around. "Have a good time. Aunt Maria said she'd bring you home this evening."

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And away he drove, soon lost to sight in the whirl of falling snow.

“How do, Hilda?” said Clarence, as he opened the door for her.

He was ten years old. He had long, thin legs and sloping shoulders. His hair was sandy, his face quite pale, and his eyes watery. But he looked as though he were quite pleased with himself.

“Come in,” he went on. “Ma asked quite a number, but only two have come—Marie and Tubby. I don’t see why the bigger boys and girls stayed away. I don’t like just ordinary children. But I s’pose I’ll have to stand it. *You’ll* have a good time, even if I don’t.”

They went into the little hall. On one side of it was the dining-room, and on the other side the sitting-room. Back of the dining-room was the kitchen. There were no other rooms on that floor.

Marie and Tubby rushed out to see Hilda.

Marie was a very pretty girl of six. Tubby was a dear little boy who was not yet three years old. He was as plump as a partridge, and his yellow hair was all tousled over his face and kept getting into his big blue eyes, that sometimes twinkled with fun and sometimes were sober as a judge's. His real name was Reginald, but everybody called him Tubby. He went up to Hilda and put a fat little hand in hers.

"I glad 'oo tame, Hilda," said he.

"Now then," said Clarence, "what shall we do? We can't eat lunch yet, because it's too early. It's all spread for us in the dining-room, but I won't let you see it yet. I tell you what I'll do, though: I've just got a new top, and I'll let you watch me spin it."

Clarence brought out his top and tried to spin it, while the other children looked on. About half the time it wouldn't spin, for he had not learned how to throw it with the proper twist.

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He fussed with it a long time, and finally he said:

“I don’t think spinning tops is much fun. Let’s do something else. Say! Don’t you want to hear me speak my piece that I’ve learned for the school exhibition?”

Nobody said anything, so Clarence stood up on the hall stairs and began:

“‘Under a spreading chestnut tree,
The village smithy stands—’

“Er—oh—let’s see: ‘The village smithy stands.’ Er—there’s something about Mr. Smith—well, never mind that line.

“‘The village smithy stands.’

“Then—something or other is he——

“‘With large and snowy hands!’”

“It’s ‘sinewy,’” said Marie.

“No, ’t isn’t; it’s ‘snowy’!”

“‘Snowy’!” cried Marie. “How could he keep his hands snowy in a blacksmith’s?”

"I don't care. I guess I know," returned Clarence, with a sniff. "What's 'sinewy'? There ain't any such word at all! Now, see what you've done! You've put me all out, so that I can't say the rest, anyhow. I don't think speaking pieces is much fun after all. Don't you want to see me set up my lead soldiers? I'll do it if you'll promise not to break them. Ma said I must be careful how I let you use my things."

"Oh, let's *all* play something together!" broke in Marie. "It isn't any fun to sit still and just watch *you*."

"Well," said Clarence, who was rather surprised to hear this, "I'll play barber, if you'll let me be the barber and cut your hair off with Ma's scissors. And I'll shave you, Tubby, with the bread knife."

But the girls didn't want Clarence to cut their hair off, and Tubby was afraid of the bread-knife. So Marie got up a game of puss-in-the-corner, and after this they all slid

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downstairs about fifty times, laughing and shouting, until Clarence bumped his head; after which he thought that sliding downstairs was no fun at all. But by this time the other three children were having such a good time that they paid no attention to Clarence. After a while, though, they began to be very hungry. Clarence grinned.

“Now I guess you’re going to be glad you came,” said he. “Come into the dining-room and we’ll have the lunch that Ma left for us.”

They all made a rush for the dining-room. There they found the table set for the seven children who had been asked. At each place there was a small sandwich, cut very thin, a glass of milk, and a lady-finger.

“Ain’t that fine?” asked Clarence. “And we can eat up all the things that the others aren’t going to get. That’ll make two sandwiches apiece for everybody except Tubby. He’s so little he don’t need much.”

“’Es, I *do!*” said Tubby. “I want *four* sandwiches!” And, indeed, the sandwiches were so small that the two girls each ate one almost at a bite. But because Tubby looked so wistful, Hilda gave him her second one, though she was just about as hungry after luncheon as she had been before.

While they were eating they noticed how fast the snow was falling, and how deep it lay upon the ground. They could see only a short distance, so thick was the whirling snow. The wind was piling it in great drifts against the house. Already it nearly reached the lower window-pane. The whole world seemed to have turned to snow.

It was a wonderful sight, and the children watched it for a long, long time. A hush fell on them, and they spoke very little. They felt as if they were all alone, shut in by the white, whirling flakes that filled the air and covered the earth and half buried the cottage in their cold embrace.

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After a while they turned away from the window and looked at picture-books and played quiet games. Still the snow blew against the window glass, and the sleet now began to rattle on the roof and sides of the cottage.

“I wish Ma would come,” said Clarence. “She ought to have been here long ago. And I can’t see any carriages or any people passing. I can’t even see the road, the snow is so thick.”

“I’m beginning to feel awfully cold,” said Marie, shivering.

“So’m I,” said Tubby. “What ze matter?”

Surely enough, the room was growing colder all the time.

“Why, the fire’s going out,” cried Clarence all of a sudden. The children ran from the sitting-room to the dining-room, and from there to the kitchen; but it was cold in all of them. The three stoves that warmed them, no

longer blazed a bright red. They were dulled down so that no heat came from them. Clarence took a poker and opened the doors and looked inside of them.

“Gracious!” said he. “They’re almost out. They need coal.”

“Can we help you, Clarence?” asked Hilda.

“Well, I should think not!” returned he. “I’m a boy, and I don’t need to have girls to help me. This is my Ma’s house, and when she’s away it’s mine. You just stand aside and let me see to this.”

There was an enormous coal-hod full of coal by the dining-room stove. Clarence took hold of its handle and gave it as big a lift as he could. He raised it almost two inches, and then let go, puffing.

“Ouch!” cried he. “That thing cuts my hand.”

The other children stood around, looking at him silently. He felt that he *must* do it

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this time. So he rolled up his sleeves and got both hands around the handle and braced himself for a tremendous lift.

“W-o-o-o!” he cried all of a sudden; for after lifting the great hod quite a distance he had to let go all of a sudden, and, whack! it came down on his toes.

“Ow! ow! ow!” he yelled, hobbling around the room. Meanwhile the fire was getting lower and lower, and the cold was worse and worse.

“We all be f’ozen,” said Tubby, blowing his little fingers and looking very unhappy.

“Come, you girls!” said Clarence. “I will let you help me a little. You all take hold and lift with me. Now—when I say *three!* up with her—one, two, *three!*”

They all pulled and hauled in different directions, when bump! they upset the hod, and all the coal went out on the floor.

“Now see what you’ve done!” shouted

Clarence. "That's what comes of letting girls help. The fires'll all go out now and we'll freeze to death! And it's getting dark, and we haven't any light. Oh, why didn't Ma come? Why didn't Ma come?"

Marie was much frightened, too; and poor Tubby began to whimper. The daylight was really going, and the fire was nearly gone.

"I'll make things all right, Clarence," said Hilda all at once. "If you children promise to do just what I tell you, we'll soon have a good fire and light and everything."

Hilda was so small that it seemed strange to hear her speak so confidently. The other children looked at her for a moment. Clarence had lost his boastfulness, and he said nothing. Suddenly Tubby went up to Hilda and nestled his hand in hers.

"I'll p'omise," said he.

And Clarence and Marie promised.

"Now," said Hilda, "quick! We couldn't

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ever lift a big hod of coal; but let's each of us pick up pieces of coal and drop them into the stoves. All of us now!"

They went at the coal like birds picking up big black seeds, and soon they had put a little pile on each fire—not too much at first, Hilda said. And she knew how to open the draughts so as to make the dying fire light the fresh coal. She bustled about, looking at one stove and then another, and before very long a dull red glow began to shine in the dark stoves, and the cracking and snapping of the fresh coal was heard as it kindled and blazed.

"Hurray!" cried all the children as they felt the heat. But Clarence said rather sullenly:

"Pooh! That was easy enough."

"Now we must try to light the gas," said Hilda. "It's getting so dark. Where are the matches, Clarence?"

"Oh, my Ma says that children musn't

play with matches! You'll set the house on fire."

"I'm not going to play with them," said Hilda. "I'm going to use them. Ah, there they are!"

She found three matches, and then began to wonder how she could get at the gas jets. They were hung from the middle of the ceiling in each room, far above Hilda's head. The children looked on to see what she would do.

"Help me push a chair," said Hilda.

She pushed it up by the dining-room table, climbed on the chair, and from the chair upon the table. There, standing on her tip-toes, she could just reach the gas jets. She scratched a match and turned on the gas, touching the tips with the fire in her hand.

Pouf-f! A brilliant light flooded the dark room.

"Hurray! Hurray!" again cried all the children.

Hilda could not reach the gas in the sit-

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ting-room, for there was no table beneath it to stand on. So she lighted the kitchen lights, and the whole place looked cheery and warm.

“But, Hilda,” said Tubby, “my tummock is all hollow.” All the children, indeed, were as hungry as a pack of wolves.

“Well,” said Hilda, “there must be some food in the house.” She was the hungriest of them all, for she had given up her extra lunch to Tubby. She went about the kitchen, opening the pantry doors and peering into the closets.

“Here’s dinner!” she cried at last. She had found a fine cold roast leg of lamb on a platter.

“Hilda!” said Clarence, who was quite aghast. “You mustn’t touch that lamb. My Ma wouldn’t want you to.”

“She wouldn’t want us all to starve!” said Hilda sturdily. “As for your old lamb, my papa will give you a whole flock of lambs. Come on, children!”

She set out the roast lamb on the table. Then she found some bread and butter, and a slab of jelly cake, and half a mince pie, a pitcher of milk, and finally a whole jar of strawberry jam. It was like a splendid picnic on a winter's night.

When Tubby saw all these good things come out of the pantry he could hardly show his joy. His face shone like the sun, and he threw himself all over Hilda's neck.

"Hilda," he said at last, in almost solemn tones; "Hilda—you're—you're—*bully!*"

All the children ate like heroes. Hilda sawed off great chunks of the cold lamb with a knife the best way she could. The bread was chopped up into pieces and smeared with jam. The pie and the cake and the milk were all finished. Everybody had enough. Even Clarence forgot to grumble, for after the eating once began, he ate as much as any of them. When they had finished they were so comfortable, and the room was so warm, and

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they had had such an exciting time, then they all grew very drowsy. Tubby's eyes were closing even as he finished, and everyone there was heavy with sleep.

And outside the snow still fell and the wind blew.

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Hilda's father was smoking by the fire in his Den that evening after dinner when a tremendous scraping and stamping was heard outside, followed by steps on the verandah. Then doors opened, and a heavy, lumbering sound echoed in the hall. A minute later Aunt Maria burst into his room, covered with snow from head to foot, and panting and gulping in a most extraordinary manner.

"Good gracious! What's the matter, Aunt Maria? I didn't expect you on such a night as this."

"Oh!" wailed Aunt Maria. "I left him—and now he's freezing in the dark! O-o-o!"

“What? Who’s freezing in the dark?”

“Clarence! my Clarence!” cried Aunt Maria, with a fresh burst of tears. The snow from her clothes was melting into a large puddle in the middle of the rug on which she stood.

“Why,” said Hilda’s father, “what’s happened to Clarence? Isn’t he safe at home?”

“At home? Yes! but that’s where he’s freezing in the dark! Oh! I shall find his little form all cold—he was so beautiful!”

“Tell me! I don’t understand,” said Hilda’s father, beginning now for the first time to look anxious. “Where did you come from—and where is Hilda?”

“O-o-o, don’t ask me! I—I—just went to the city to do some shopping, and then the snow came, and when the train got as far as here, it couldn’t go any further. So I had to stop, and the snow-plough made a road from the station to your house, and here I am—and oh, my Clarence—he is frozen in the dark!”

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“But, of course,” said Hilda’s father, “you left a maid with the children, or some grown person?”

“N-o-o-o! I—I—let the maid go, too. I thought I should be back early. And so by this time there’s no fire in the house, and it’s all dark, and—Clarence is freezing!”

Hilda’s father jumped up like a shot.

“*What!*” he asked. “You left those children all alone? Wait here!”

He ran hastily downstairs and spoke a few quick, sharp words to the men at the door. Then he hurried back to his own room. In two minutes he came through the Den wearing huge jack-boots, a long fur coat, and with a fur cap on his head.

“Be ready to come with me at once,” he said to Aunt Maria.

“But it’s no use,” she snuffled. “The men said their horses couldn’t pull the snow-plough any further.”

“Then we’ll get a whole regiment of

horses!" returned he, and was downstairs again in a jiffy.

Then Aunt Maria heard men shouting and the blowing of a horn, and through the windows she saw lights flash out in the whirling snow. In ten minutes her name was called, and she went down into the hall. The door was wide open, though already a whole snowbank had blown in. But there was Hilda's father.

"Come!" he said, and guided her by the arm out into the darkness.

She saw six big horses harnessed to a snow-plough, with two men to manage it. Behind the snow-plough was a closed carriage.

"Get in," said Hilda's father. "We must reach those children in time to save them, if we can."

Cr-r-unch! went the snow-plough as the horses stamped and tugged among the drifts. Behind, in the closed carriage, Aunt Maria was muffled up in rugs. Hilda's father was

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beside her, but he did not speak a word. Cr-r-runch! On they went, sometimes very slowly, where the snow had drifted thick; sometimes faster, where the wind had blown the road all bare. But on, on, on—good horses and willing men.

After nearly an hour had passed Aunt Maria suddenly gave a cry.

“Oh!” she said. “There is the hill that overlooks my house. When we reach the top we can see it. Oh! I don’t dare look. I know it is all black and cold and my Clarence—— Oh! oh!”

Slowly up the hill toiled the great snow-plough. After it and in its white, frosty track, followed the carriage.

“Are we at the top yet?” gasped Aunt Maria. “Are we? Are we? I can not bear to look upon the house. It is the tomb of Clarence!”

The carriage bumped as it reached the top. Aunt Maria in spite of her grief pressed her

face against the carriage window. So did Hilda's father.

The snow flew wild as ever. The night was black as ink. But down at the foot of the hill where the cottage lay, a long shaft of warm, bright light streamed out into the darkness. The men on the snow-plough gave a great shout, and so did Hilda's father, Aunt Maria fainted dead away.

But she was up in a moment.

"See!" she cried. "See! I was a foolish woman to be afraid. Ought I not to have known that Clarence could take care of everything? He is so bright; he has such a mind! You never quite felt it, I'm afraid; but now you see what that boy can do. And all by himself, too!"

They reached the cottage and the six great horses stopped. Hilda's father threw the carriage door open and plunged into the snow as if he were diving. Aunt Maria followed through the sort of tunnel that he made.

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In a few moments they had rushed in at the front door, bringing with them a shower of snow.

Everything was still. Not a sound was heard except the ticking of a clock. But the stoves were aglow; the gas was burning brightly in the dining-room. On the table was a heap of dishes, knives, forks, spoons, crusts of bread, a pie-plate, a jam-pot, and in the middle, all that was left of a leg of roast lamb, which looked as though Indians had been hacking it with their tomahawks.

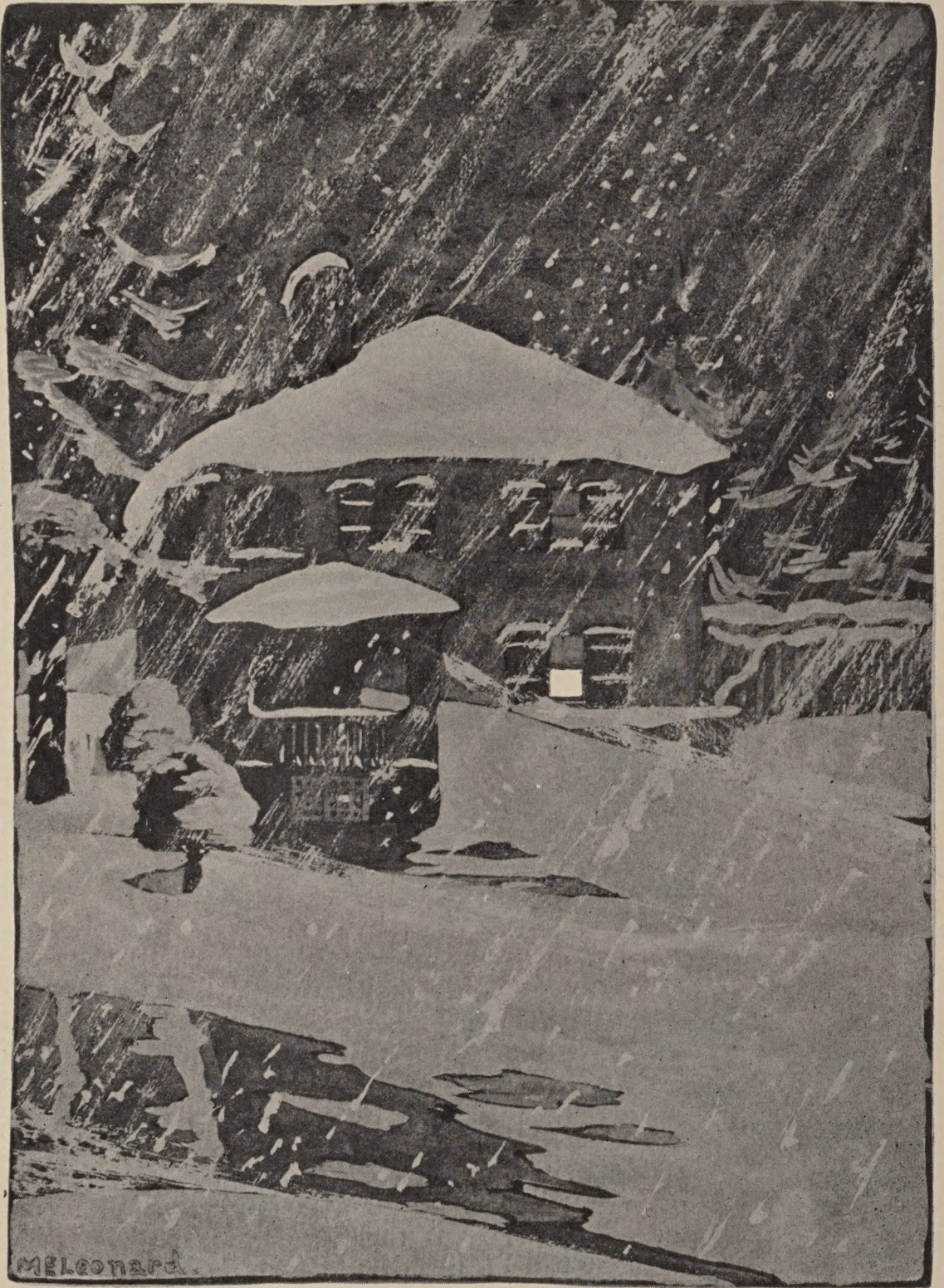
“Well, I never!” said Aunt Maria. “Such disorder!”

“That’s the best thing I’ve seen yet,” said Hilda’s father, laughing. “Let’s look for them upstairs.”

Both went up and lighted the gas in the hall.

“Look here,” said Hilda’s father, swinging a door open.

It was Aunt Maria’s own room. On her



MELCONARD.

In the Snow

wide white pillows lay three childish heads that peeped out from under a big quilt. Hilda and Marie and Tubby were fast asleep. But as she looked at them, Aunt Maria gave a piercing shriek.

“I knew it! I knew it! See! Something dreadful has happened to him! The child, Tubby, is covered with blood. He has been gashed across the face. Oh, help!”

Aunt Maria made such an outcry that the three children slowly wakened, among them Tubby. His eyes blinked at the lights, and then at Aunt Maria, who still kept wringing her hands. Then he opened his mouth and said very seriously, but with the faint dawning of a satisfied grin:

“’Taint blood. It’s ’trawberry jam.”

“But where,” cried Aunt Maria, “is my Clarence, who has protected you and saved your lives? Where is he?”

There was a sort of stumbling sound in the hall, and Clarence, still only half awake,

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rolled in. Aunt Maria looked at him with pride and triumph.

“Now,” she said, “children, speak up. Who kept the fires going so that you wouldn’t freeze?”

The other children—even Clarence—answered all together:

“HILDA!”

“What? But who lighted the gas for you?”

“HILDA!”

“And the food you had—who got that for you?”

“HILDA! HILDA!” cried they all; and Tubby added, “And the ’trawberry jam.”

Hilda’s father turned with his arms stretched out to her, and she leaped into them and put her own arms tight around his neck.

III

HILDA AND THE ELF

HILDA was sitting on the grass under a big tree. It was a favourite nook of hers, down at the end of the long meadow where the clover-blossoms swayed in the wind. She often went there all by herself in the afternoon, with her doll for company. Hilda liked to be alone sometimes, because she had thoughts and fancies that no one else ever seemed quite to understand; and so she kept them to herself and dreamed over them under the big tree at the end of the meadow.

It was the last week of September, and in a day or two Hilda was to be sent to school for the first time in her life. She didn't exactly know what school was like or whether she was going to be pleased with it or not. She was six years old, and she thought that

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she knew enough already without going to any school. She could read through "Mother Goose" without making a single mistake, for she knew it all by heart; and if you just showed her one of the pictures she could say the rhymes off fast. And she could tell the stories out of a good many other books, such as "The White Cat" and "Puss in Boots" and "Aladdin," besides a good many more which her father had told her; and she could count as far as thirty, and give the names of the numbers up to ten when she saw them, except that she sometimes got 6 mixed with 9, because they looked so much alike—only the curly parts were in different places. She could even tell time by the big clock at the foot of the staircase—that is, she knew the hours. So, as she thought it all over by herself under the big tree, it did seem rather silly to send her to school. She had already learned as much as she needed to know or wanted to know, and so——

What was that noise?

Hilda stopped thinking of school and began to look about her. She had surely heard something strange, and quite near by. As she listened, there came to her ears a sound like a long hiss, and then a curious little gasping and puffing, as though somebody was very much out of breath. It was all very faint, and she only heard it because her ears were so near the ground. Yet she could see nothing. The grass between her and the stone wall was quite long; and even when she sat up it was as high as her head. So she scrambled to her feet and looked in the direction of the sounds. Then she saw a strange sight.

Down at one corner of the wall was a big black spider. Hilda did not like spiders, and she used to dream awful dreams about them. She did not often dream at all; but somehow or other she always dreamed on Thanksgiving night and on the night after Christmas,

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and it was generally about spiders. But she had never dreamed of a spider so big and black and fat and horrid as this spider which she now saw near the wall. And he was not spinning webs or doing any useful things. He was standing up on his hind claws and striking out with his front claws, while he made a hissing noise that sounded like a snake's.

The next moment Hilda saw what it all meant. Close to the wall, and with his back against it, was a tiny little creature only a few inches high. He was dressed in some kind of fine silken material that gleamed and glittered like spun gold, and in his hand he held what looked like a small, sharp needle, but which Hilda saw was a sword. With this he was slashing and lunging at the great spider with all his might. The spider was afraid to come too near, lest its claws should be pierced by the sharp sword; but it kept the long, hairy nippers moving, and it hissed

and hissed and hissed. The little creature who was defending himself was very pale, and every time the spider hissed, his face grew paler still, and he gasped and swayed as though he were going to fall. Hilda saw that he could not hold out much longer.

“Well!” said she. “I’ll just make that spider stop.”

She looked about and saw a large stone. It was all she could do to lift it, but she hoisted it up in her two little hands. Then she took a step or two, and, standing just behind the spider, she held the stone directly over him. The spider did not notice her. He was puffing himself up for a final hiss. Slowly and savagely he rose on his powerful hind claws. His fore-claws, big and black, were raised in the air. In two seconds he would have hissed and sprung, when—crash! smash! Down came the great big stone, and the spider was all in pieces.

“There!” said Hilda. “Take that!”

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She looked at the little creature who had been fighting the spider. He was leaning against the wall, and his face was as white as paper. When he saw the spider smashed, he let his sword fall from his hand, and it went tinkling down among the stones. But in a minute or two his colour came back to him, his eyes grew bright, and he stood up straight and looked into Hilda's face.

"You have saved my life," said he.

His voice was such a little bit of a voice that Hilda had to lean down to hear it; but it sounded sweet and clear like a silver harp. Hilda didn't know what to say.

"Yes," he went on, "you have saved my life. Who are you, little girl?"

"Oh!" she said, "I'm Hilda."

"Hilda? That's a very pretty name. I owe you a great deal, Hilda."

"Oh, no," said Hilda simply. "I don't like spiders."

"Neither do I," remarked he, picking up

his sword and wiping it on a clover-leaf.

“Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“Yes,” said Hilda; “only I thought it wouldn’t be polite to ask.”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” returned he, smiling. “I’m an Elf, and I have the power of all the elves. You know elves are almost the same as fairies.”

“Are they?” asked Hilda.

“Yes,” replied the Elf; “only people don’t see us very often. But I am an Elf.”

“You do look like one,” admitted Hilda thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said he, “and I have magic power. I am going to give you some of it because you killed the spider. How would you like to be able to wish for anything you want and have it come true?”

“Of course, I should like it,” said Hilda. “But if you have magic power, why didn’t you just wish for the spider to be dead. He would have killed you in another minute.”

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“Ah,” replied the Elf, shaking his head ruefully, “spiders are the born enemies of elves, and they are the one thing over which we have no power. If we meet them we have to fight with them, and their breath is poisonous to us. That is why we are not so powerful as the fairies. But I can make you a gift of five magic wishes, and I’m going to do so. Listen. After you wake up to-morrow morning you will be able to wish five times, each time for anything you want, and your wish will be answered as soon as you make it. But I advise you not to use up your wishes on foolish things, such as most children want, but to keep them all till you are a great deal older, or until you really and truly need them.”

“But how am I going to make the wishes so that they will be answered?” asked Hilda, who was beginning to be a good deal excited.

“I’ll tell you,” said the Elf. “When you

have decided that you really do need anything, go off somewhere all by yourself, and say aloud just what it is that you wish for. Then say over these words:

“Little elf, little elf,
Come to me your ownty self.
Make my spoken wish come true
As you said that you would do.

“Then you will have a sign that your wish is heard and answered. But be a wise little girl and don't waste your wishes on trifles.”

“I won't,” said Hilda. “But I wish you could make me quite understand that it is all so.”

“Well, ask me to do something to make you sure. Try and see whether I am really an Elf and have magic power. [Think of some proof.”

“Oh,” said Hilda, looking around and not knowing just what to say. “Well—er—well, suppose you turn all the green grass in this meadow bright blue.”

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“I will,” replied the Elf; “and then you will believe?”

“Yes; but do it now.”

“Pretty soon,” said the Elf.

Hilda had been looking at the meadow to see whether it was turning bright blue. But it stayed just as green as ever.

“Why don’t you do it?” asked Hilda, facing about.

But the Elf had disappeared.

“Pooh!” thought Hilda, as she walked slowly back to the house for dinner. “I don’t believe it, after all. Maybe I dreamed the whole thing.”

But when she reached the house she thought that she would ask her mother about it. She didn’t tell what had happened, because she was afraid that her mother might laugh; but after sitting beside her for a little while on the verandah steps, she asked:

“Mamma, are there any real fairies in the world?”

“Oh, no!” said her mother, smiling. But then she suddenly thought of what had happened at Hilda’s christening, and so she added: “That is, I don’t quite think there are, but I’m not really sure.”

“Well, are there any elves?” asked Hilda.

“Dear me, no. There aren’t any elves except in picture-books.”

“But,” said Hilda, “if there are perhaps-fairies, why aren’t there some perhaps-elves?”

Hilda’s mother did not know just how to answer this. Finally, she said:

“Well, Hilda, I never heard of anybody seeing an Elf.”

“But if I really saw an Elf, then there would be elves?”

“Why, of course, dear. Only you’d better wait until you see one before you puzzle your small head about them.”

Hilda said nothing more; but after she had gone to bed that night she thought about

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it all for a long while until she fell fast asleep.

But the next morning when she woke she was quite sure that the Elf and the Wishes were all a dream. After she had been dressed, she went down to breakfast. Her mother was there, but her father had gone out for an early walk and had not yet returned. Breakfast was nearly over when all of a sudden he came rushing into the dining-room with his hat on his head and his stick in his hand.

“Here is a most astonishing thing!” cried he. “Wonderful! I can’t explain it! Every blade of grass in the Long Meadow has turned a bright sky-blue! Briggs saw it first and ran out to tell me; and there are hundreds of people down there looking at it. I never heard of such a thing before! Professor Hoot, who is visiting at the Rectory, says that it is due to the peculiar chemical composition of the soil. He is going to

analyse some of the earth and write a paper about it. But the most curious fact is this: every blade of grass in that one particular meadow is bright blue, but not one single blade of grass in the next meadow has been changed at all. It is marvellous!”

He went on talking excitedly and walking up and down the room. It was a long while before he could be got to sit down and eat his breakfast, and soon after he went off to talk with Professor Hoot. But Hilda said nothing. She only smiled to herself and knew in her heart that she had not been dreaming the day before, but that the five magic Wishes were really hers.

IV

THE FIRST WISH

ON the next Monday Hilda was sent to school. She was small for her age; and so Miss Morris, the principal, put her in the kindergarten. There she found a number of girls whom she already knew; and she began to think that she would like it. Everything was different from what she had supposed a school would be. No one had to study any books; but some of the girls were building block-houses, and others were stringing beads, and others were putting little coloured pegs into holes. Some very small children were standing in a circle and singing a song like this:

“The rat takes the cheese,
The rat takes the cheese,
Heigh-O, the Jerry-O,
The rat takes the cheese!”

Then they would all go down on their hands and knees and squeak and pretend to nibble something. This was to teach them what rats are, and that cheese can be eaten. They would never have learned those things at home, and so their mothers had sent them to the kindergarten to be educated thoroughly.

Hilda was not set to stringing beads or playing rat; but the kindergarten teacher, Miss McFadd, took her over to a corner where five or six girls were sitting.

“Here, Hilda,” said Miss McFadd, “are all kinds of splints and strips of different colours which can be woven into pretty little baskets. Just watch how the others do them and try to make a very simple basket yourself. I will see what you have done at noon-time.”

So she went away and left Hilda with the other girls. Now, Hilda did not know any of them to speak to; but one of them she had

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heard about and was sorry to see her there. This was a tall, lank, unpleasant-looking girl named Frieda. She was nearly two years older than Hilda, but because she was lazy and dull she was still in the kindergarten. She could not learn things quickly herself, but she was as malicious and full of tricks as a monkey; and she always tried to tease the new children who had just come to the school. Being older than the rest of the girls, she was a sort of leader among them; and though they did not like her very well, they were afraid of her sharp tongue and of the tricks she might play on them if they did not do what she wanted.

No sooner had Hilda sat down than Frieda began to mock her. If Hilda picked up a piece of coloured plaiting Frieda picked up one just like it. If Hilda put one down, Frieda did the same. If Hilda moved her chair, Frieda moved hers. If Hilda stopped and did nothing, Frieda stopped too.

If Hilda coughed, Frieda coughed. In fact, she kept mimicking Hilda until the poor child didn't know what to do. The worst of it was that the other children, instead of going on with their work, all stopped doing anything, and watched Frieda. When at last she had made Hilda very unhappy, they giggled and whispered to each other, until Hilda was ready to cry with shame.

"Huh!" said Frieda to the girl who sat beside her. "We don't want any cry-babies here, do we? They ought to be in their little cribs at home in the nursery."

"I'm *not* a cry-baby!" said Hilda, trying to keep the tears back.

"Cry-baby! Cry-baby!" called Frieda, and then she pretended to cry herself, and wipe her eyes with her handkerchief; after which she thrust her face forward and stuck out her tongue. She looked exactly like an ape.

Just at this moment Miss McFadd came

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up. All the children became very quiet and began to work busily on their baskets. Only Hilda sat idle. She was trying not to cry.

“Children, it is noon,” said Miss McFadd. “You may go down stairs for your luncheon. How have you got on with your basket, Hilda?”

Hilda did not know what to say.

“Oh, Miss McFadd!” said Frieda. “She hasn’t done anything at all.”

“How is this?” asked Miss McFadd sharply. “Haven’t you even tried to do your basket? The other girls were to show you how.”

“Oh, Miss McFadd!” broke in Frieda, “We did show her how, but she wouldn’t try at all.”

Miss McFadd looked at Hilda very severely. She ought to have shown Hilda herself how to make the basket; only she had forgotten all about it. She knew this, but it only made her more cross with Hilda.

“I am sorry,” she said, “that you are so obstinate as not to try. I shall have to punish you by leaving you here alone while the other children have their luncheon. You can have something to eat, but you must stay here until you have at least begun your basket. I am afraid that you are a very sulky little girl.”

Hilda wanted to tell Miss McFadd all about everything and how Frieda had treated her, and how the others had not once offered to show her about the basket. But she hated to tell tales, because she had been taught that it was mean. So she did not say a word, but just sat still. Miss McFadd looked at her a moment and then went away.

“There, cry-baby!” said Frieda, as she got up to go with the rest. “Now, you’ll have a nice time all by yourself! You’re too stupid to make a basket! Stupid! Stupid!”

Then she stuck out her tongue again and went away.

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Hilda was in despair. She felt that she had been disgraced before all the children on the very first day of her school. She hadn't supposed that anyone could be so hateful as Frieda was; and Miss McFadd seemed to be against her, too. School had seemed so pleasant to her, and now it was all spoilt at the very outset. And she knew that she couldn't even begin to make a basket. As soon as the maid had brought her a tray with her luncheon on it and left her quite alone, Hilda broke down and began to sob. She had never felt so unhappy in all her life.

She sobbed and sobbed, and her tears fell down upon the plaits that were in her lap. If she could only weave them into a fine basket and make Frieda stop tormenting her! Suddenly she remembered the Elf and the wishes that he had given her. But was it really true that she could wish things? Anyhow she could try. She had almost forgotten the rhyme which the Elf had taught her, but she

slowly recalled the words. Then she said aloud:

“ I wish for a most beautiful basket.

“ Little elf, little elf,
Come to me your ownty self.
Make my spoken wish come true
As you said that you would do.”

Ting! A sound like a little silver bell was heard in the room behind her, and then of a sudden all the coloured strips in her lap and on the floor at her feet seemed to slide together; and before Hilda knew what was happening, a lovely basket stood beside her. It was cunningly woven in the shape of a Grecian vase, and the colours were blended so beautifully that the whole looked like a great flower. Hilda clapped her hands with joy and her eyes sparkled.

“ Wonderful!” cried she.

Then, after looking at the basket for a while, she ate her luncheon most contentedly.

At the end of the hour the children all

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came trooping upstairs again. Frieda rushed over to where Hilda sat. She wanted to begin tormenting her again.

“Well, cry-baby,” she said. “How did you like being punished? I suppose you’ve been making a fine basket.”

“Yes, I have,” said Hilda.

“Ho, ho!” jeered Frieda. “Yes, a lot you have! Let’s see it.”

“Here it is,” said Hilda.

Frieda looked and her eyes got as big as saucers and her mouth opened with astonishment! She fairly gasped and hadn’t a word to say. Just then Miss McFadd came up.

“Well, Hilda,” said she, very severely, “have you begun your—— Oh!” And she, too, gasped.

“Why,” she cried, “that’s the most beautiful basket that was ever made in this school. I didn’t know that you had learned how to make baskets. Well, then, I’ll put you at something else in another part of the room.”

So Hilda was taken away from Frieda and set to counting blue buttons. The children with whom she was now put were nice children, so that when Hilda went home that night she was as gay as a lark.

But that night she was troubled because she remembered how the Elf had told her not to use up her Wishes on little things. She was afraid she had been foolish to waste the first Wish on a basket; yet, anyhow, she had put an end to her unhappiness. And the following days at school were so pleasant and she had such fun and so many things to think about that she nearly forgot the Wishes altogether.

V

THE SECOND WISH

THE months went by, and winter came. It was almost Christmas time. Hilda's father had gone away upon business, but he was to return on Christmas Eve so as to be home for the Christmas tree and to see Hilda hang up her stockings, one on each side of the fireplace in her room. The snow lay deep on the ground, and everyone began to feel like Christmas. Hilda helped dress the house with sprays of pine and hemlock and to put bits of mistletoe among the evergreen which almost covered the cluster of electric globes that hung overhead.

It was only three days before Christmas Day, when Hilda's mother suddenly fell ill. At first she thought it was nothing more than

a cold; but before evening she was so much worse that she had to send for a doctor. The regular doctor was away, so a different doctor came in his place. He was a very young doctor and so he knew a great deal; for it is a curious thing that the younger a doctor is, the more he knows. Indeed, there is nobody who knows more than a young doctor, except a medical student, and this, I suppose, is because a medical student is younger still.

Now, this doctor did not like Hilda. He did not know what to say to children, and so he always puffed himself up and used long words. He had an idea that Hilda was laughing at him when he did this. It wasn't so, for Hilda was only puzzled by him; yet he thought it was so, and therefore when he came into the house and saw her in the hall, he looked fidgetty.

"Well, little girl," said he, "I am informed that your mother is suffering from indisposition. From such intelligence as I

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was able to gather from the conversation of the domestic who was dispatched to summon me, I am inclined to diagnose the complaint as pulmonary in its nature."

Hilda didn't like to have the Doctor call her "little girl" when he knew her name perfectly well. She didn't know why she didn't like it, but she just didn't. She had understood scarcely a word of what he had said, and so she did not answer, but tried to smile out of politeness.

The Doctor thought she was smiling at him. So he scowled at her and glared and went upstairs. Hilda wondered why he was so cross.

When he came down, she looked at him timidly and asked:

"Will you please tell me how mamma is?"

The Doctor wagged his head at her pompously.

"Your intelligence is still too immature to allow you to comprehend my diagnosis. The

case, however, is one of idiopathic pneumonia, and has already reached the stage of hepatisation."

Poor Hilda did not understand a word of this, but she felt that it meant something very bad.

"Is she very sick?" she asked, after a moment's pause.

The Doctor snarled.

"Indubitably," said he. "Have you no intelligence whatever? Or are you an instance of arrested development? Only an idiot child could fail to understand plain English."

Hilda knew what this meant and she was vexed.

"It isn't plain English!" said she, getting red in the face; for she didn't like to be called an idiot child. "I never heard anybody talk the way you talk."

The Doctor was furious. For once, he forgot to use long words.

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“How dare you be so saucy!” cried he. “You are a bundle of impudence! Get out of my way and let me pass!”

And he went out, banging the door as he shut it. Hilda was so frightened by his anger that she sat on the stairs a long time and then went straight up to her mother's room. She forgot all about Christmas and felt only a sinking at her heart because her mother was so ill.

The room was darkened, so that Hilda could scarcely see anything as she went in. But very soon she could make out her mother's face lying upon the pillow. In a chair beside her was a nurse who had just come. She had a white cap on her head and a sort of white uniform with cuffs and a neat collar. Hilda thought she looked very nice. When she saw Hilda, she got up from her chair so that Hilda could sit there. But Hilda stood by the bed and put her face down on the pillow beside her mother's.

"Mamma, mamma," she asked pitifully; "are you very sick?"

"Yes, dear, I'm afraid I am," said her mother almost in a whisper. "Dr. Sniffen says it is very serious. He thought it better to tell me."

Hilda somehow felt as though the Doctor were to blame.

"I don't believe *he* knows," she said after a minute.

"Sh-h! You shouldn't speak like that. Why do you say that he doesn't know?"

"Oh, why—I don't like him. He was cross to me, just now."

"Was he? Then you must have provoked him in some way. He has done everything he can at present, and he is going to telegraph for papa—only I am afraid the telegram won't reach him, because he must already be on the way home. It will be a dull Christmas for you, dear, I'm afraid. I shall not be able to see about your tree."

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“Oh, I don’t care anything about my tree,” cried Hilda. “If you will only get well, that is all I want.”

But the nurse came up just then and said that the Doctor had left orders that there was to be very little talking. So Hilda sat down in one corner of the room for a long time, very sorrowful; and then the nurse sent her downstairs. She got her dolls and tried to play with them, but somehow she could not amuse herself in that way; for she felt all the time as though something dreadful was going to happen. The house was very still and she was very lonely and afraid. If only her papa would come home! It would make her feel more courageous just to hear his voice and have him take her up in his strong arms.

“He’s better than that old Doctor!” said Hilda to herself as she sat by the open fire in the hall and saw pictures in the flames.

Later in the afternoon she crept up to the

sick room and looked in; but the nurse motioned her to go away, for her mother was half asleep. So she went back once more and sat very quietly until it began to grow dark. Just then the bell rang and one of the maids opened the door. The Doctor came in.

“Ugh!” he said to himself. “It’s positively hyperborean this evening. Ha! A fire!”

He saw the glow of the wood-embers as they shone in the twilight. But he didn’t see Hilda, who was crouching on a footstool very still beside the hearth; so that when he went up to the fireplace to warm his hands he stumbled over her and nearly fell.

“What’s that?” he snapped. “What d’you mean by tripping me up? Oh, it’s you, is it? I believe it was premeditated!”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Hilda. “Only I didn’t do anything. I was just sitting still. But you walked on my foot.”

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“No impudence!” said the Doctor. “Go at once and tell the maid to turn on the incandescents!”

“I don’t think she’s got any,” returned Hilda doubtfully.

“Any what?”

“Any of those—those incan—those things you said.”

“You surely are the most stupid child I ever saw,” said the Doctor, with a snarl.

“What do you do here when it’s dark?”

“We turn on the lights,” answered Hilda.

And just then the maid came in and did it.

The Doctor looked at Hilda for a minute as though he could eat her up.

“So you think to ridicule me, do you?” said he. “I wish you were *my* child for about an hour!”

“*I* don’t,” said Hilda; for she was beginning to be angry.

But the Doctor had gone upstairs.

He stayed there a long, long time,—more

than an hour; and while he was away, Hilda had her dinner. After she had finished she sat by the fire in the hall again. At last she heard a door open overhead. The Doctor was saying something. When he had finished, there was a sound like a sob, and then the door was shut and the Doctor came downstairs.

Now, the Doctor was not a bad man, but he thought so much about himself that he did not have time to think of anybody else. He really believed that Hilda was always trying to make fun of him, and he had an uneasy feeling that perhaps he was not so wonderful as he hoped he was. So when he saw the child waiting for him, his anger toward her came back to him, and he said a cruel thing, though perhaps he did not mean to be cruel.

“Well, little girl,” he said very solemnly, “I hope that you will leave off your impertinent ways now, for your mother is probably not going to recover. She is very ill, very ill

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indeed; and you ought to be thinking of your great misfortune, rather than planning new manifestations of your most unhappy disposition. At such a time as this——”

“Isn’t mamma going to get well?” cried Hilda.

“I think not. She——”

“Oh! oh!” Hilda burst into tears. Her sobs shook her little body like a leaf. The Doctor was very much disturbed, but he didn’t know what to do; so, instead of feeling sorry, he was only the more vexed.

Just then the clock in the hall struck eight. Each stroke was like a clear sweet bell. The sound made Hilda start. It reminded her of the silvery little *ting* which she had heard when her Wish was granted. A great joy came into her heart. She remembered the Elf and the four Wishes that she still had left. She stopped crying and put her little hands behind her back and looked up at the Doctor with a look of defiance.

"My mamma *is* going to get well!" she said. "She will be well to-morrow morning!"

"What do you mean?" cried the Doctor. "Are you crazy?"

"She *is* going to get well. You don't know!"

"You wretched child, how dare you speak to me in such a way! And at such a time as this! You are far worse than I ever imagined. Are you aware that I am a Doctor, and that you are nothing but a child?"

"I don't care if you are!" said Hilda. "You don't know anything about it. I'm going up to mamma now!"

And before the Doctor could stop her she had darted up the stairs out of his sight. He looked after her in astonishment, and then shrugged his shoulders and let himself out at the front door.

Hilda was so excited that she scarcely knew what she was doing. She rushed into

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her mother's room like a little whirlwind. The nurse had gone downstairs for a few moments.

"Hilda," said her mother gently, "come here. I have something sad to tell you, but try to be brave and bear it. If only your father were here to make it easier for us! The Doctor has just told me——"

Hilda could hear no more.

"Mamma! Mamma!" she cried, "I know what he's told you, and it isn't so! It isn't! It isn't! You are going to get all well—quick! You will be well to-morrow morning! You will!"

"Why, Hilda!" said her mother, astonished by the child's strange words and manner. "I wish it could be so, dear, but the Doctor said——"

"He doesn't know! He doesn't know!"

Hilda fairly screamed as she said this, and she stamped her little foot and made such a noise that the nurse came running up the stairs to see what was the matter.

"Please call the maid," said Hilda's mother. "The child is very much excited and ought to go to bed, poor darling."

So the maid came and carried Hilda off to her room. There she undressed her and tucked her up carefully and sat by her awhile until she seemed more quiet. But as soon as the maid had gone, Hilda sat up straight in bed and said out loud:

"I wish for my mamma to be all well in the morning."

Then she added:

"Little elf, little elf,
Come to me your ownty self,
Make my spoken wish come true
As you said that you would do."

Ting! A sound like a silver bell chimed out in the darkness, and Hilda knew that her Wish was heard. So she nestled down in the warm bed and let her head sink deep into the pillows. She was so tired after all her excitement that in two minutes she was fast asleep.

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When she awoke it was early morning. There was snow all over the window-sill. The winter sun was just beginning to send a bright shaft into the room. Hilda rubbed her eyes and stretched, and then suddenly remembered what had happened the night before. In a minute she had jumped out of bed and had put on her soft, woolly slippers. Down the hall she pattered and into her mother's room. The nurse made a sign that she was not to speak loud.

"How is mamma?" whispered Hilda.

"Asleep," said the nurse. "And she is much better. I don't understand it," she continued, half speaking to herself. "Her pulse is quite normal and so is her temperature."

Hilda didn't quite understand this, but she knew it was something good.

"Is she well?" she asked.

"She seems so," said the nurse, still looking puzzled. "But we must wait till she wakes up and sees the Doctor."

Hilda laughed to herself as she scampered back to her room to be dressed. While she was dressing, she heard steps on the stairs and then a loud exclamation from the Doctor. Hilda laughed some more. Presently she heard her mother say:

“But, Doctor, if everything is quite normal and there are no symptoms whatever, why should I not get up as usual?”

“Madam,” said the Doctor, “it would be quite unprecedented. To be sure, this change is most extraordinary, but it is all most irregular. Last night you were at the point of death, and so it is obvious that you cannot yet leave your room in spite of a favourable prognosis.”

“But I’m going to,” said Hilda’s mother rather sharply. “I feel perfectly well and you say you can find no trace of illness. I shall get up at once.”

“Very well, Madam; very well, Madam,” replied the Doctor in his most pompous voice.

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“Then I tell you very plainly, Madam, that I give up the case. Yes, Madam, I give up the case.”

“As you like,” said Hilda’s mother. “But so far as I can see, there *is* no case.”

The Doctor snorted, and went down the stairs. As he did so, Hilda came out of her room and walked behind him. He looked around and saw her. His face grew black and he frowned.

“You!” shouted he.

“Good-morning, Doctor,” said Hilda. “I told you that you didn’t know.”

The Doctor rushed out of the door so fast that he bumped against a tall gentleman in a long overcoat who was just coming in.

As soon as Hilda caught sight of this gentleman she gave a scream of joy, and the next minute she was in his arms.

“Papa! Papa!” she cried, nestling her head down in his big, loose coat. “Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come. Mamma’s been sick,

and I've had such a bad time, and—but she's all well now."

"Are you sure?" said Hilda's father. "The telegram said——"

"Oh, *yes!* Quite sure."

And just at that moment her mother came down the stairs in a pretty morning-gown and looking as well as she had ever looked in her life.

There was a great bumping on the verandah, and soon the door opened and a man with a big box came in.

"What's that?" asked Hilda.

"I can't tell you," said her father. "But you'll find out to-morrow night when you have your Christmas tree."

An hour later breakfast was all over and Hilda was in the hall looking at the big box and trying to guess what things were in it. Presently she heard her mother, who was still in the breakfast-room, say something that made her stop and listen.

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“But don’t you think it was very wonderful?” asked her mother. “The child seemed to be so sure that I should be well in the morning. Dr. Sniffen said that I was growing worse, but Hilda kept insisting that he didn’t know. It was positively uncanny.”

“Well,” said Hilda’s father, with a laugh, “I fancy that we needn’t make a miracle of it. Probably you had a chill or something, and Sniffen took it for pneumonia. I haven’t much opinion of these cub-doctors myself. Hilda happened to hit it off about right when she said that he didn’t know.”

And so they let it go at that.

VI

THE THIRD WISH

THE Christmas holidays passed quickly, and Hilda went back to school. She came to like her school very much, for it was all very much the same as play. She learned to sort out coloured strings and to put pegs in holes and to count blue buttons and to play rat; and they taught her ever so many songs. And she liked the children, too, all except Frieda. She kept out of Frieda's way as much as she could, but in spite of that Frieda would tease her or play tricks on her whenever she got the chance. Sometimes she would smear Hilda's dress with yellow chalk, and sometimes she would pinch her when nobody was looking; and she made fun of her to the other children. But most of them were fond of Hilda, and

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would not do anything to make her unhappy. So she got along very well and had very good times.

At last the winter ended and then came spring; and pretty soon the beautiful June days made everybody glad that vacation time was near. Hilda had planned to have a little party on the day after school ended. She thought it would be nice to ask the children whom she knew to come and spend the afternoon with her on the lawn behind the house, where there was a swing and also a pole for playing tether-ball. She spoke to her mother about it, and her mother said that she would have a big cake made, and that Hilda could cut it for the children.

So it was all planned; and Hilda went to her friends in the school and asked them if they would come. They promised very gladly.

Then Hilda thought that she would ask Frieda, for she was a friendly little soul

herself and didn't like to be on bad terms with anybody. She wanted to make up with Frieda and have the school-year end pleasantly.

"Will you come to my party on Saturday afternoon, Frieda?" asked Hilda at noon-time.

"Oh, shoo!" said Frieda. "The idea of *your* having a party! A fine sort of party! Where's it going to be?"

"On our rear lawn."

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, we're going to play games, and swing, and have a good time. Won't you please come, Frieda?"

"What are you going to have to eat?"

"A great big cake made on purpose."

"What kind of a cake?"

"A nice white cake—I don't know the name."

"Naw!" grunted Frieda, "I don't want to go to such a party as that."

"Well, all the other children are coming."

"Huh," said Frieda, with a grin. "You think they are, but you don't know much."

"Yes, I do," replied Hilda indignantly. "They've all promised."

"They have, have they? Well, you just wait and see."

And she went off, laughing to herself in a mocking sort of way. Somehow or other Hilda felt uncomfortable. She didn't see what Frieda meant, but she knew that it was something unkind. And it hurt her to think that Frieda would not make up and be friendly with her after she had asked her to the party.

The next day was the last day of school. After the usual morning session was over, the children all said good-bye to Miss McFadd, and went out merrily, very glad that they were going to have a long vacation in the beautiful summer days. As they went downstairs and out into the porch, two of

the girls came up to Hilda, looking rather uneasy.

“Oh, Hilda,” said one of them. “We’re sorry, but we can’t come to your party tomorrow.”

“Oh, dear! Why not?” asked Hilda.

“Well—because, because—we’ve got to go somewhere else.”

Just then several other children came up.

“We can’t come either, Hilda,” said they.

Hilda was greatly surprised and very much hurt. All of a sudden she saw Frieda looking at her with a grin on her face. It was plain that she knew why the children would not come.

“Won’t you tell me why you aren’t coming?” asked Hilda. “You know you promised me you would.”

“*I’ll* tell you,” cried Frieda, coming forward. “They won’t come to your party because they’re all coming to mine! *I’m* going

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to have a big chocolate cake and not any plain old white cake like yours. And I'm going to have lemonade, too. You don't know anything about giving a party."

Hilda was terribly grieved. The tears came into her eyes as she looked at all the children about her. Some of them hung their heads and seemed ashamed; but they did not say anything.

"I thought you were going to come to my party because you liked *me*," said Hilda slowly. "You promised to come, and I asked you first. Are you all going to stay away?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Tubby said:

"Well, I'll come anyhow, Hilda. I think it was mean of Frieda to have her party at the same time as yours."

"And so do I," said one of the girls.

"And I!"—"And I!" said two more of them. But the rest said nothing.

“Well,” said Hilda, “there’ll be five of us, anyway, and we’ll have fun by ourselves.”

“Huh!” grinned Frieda. “We’ll have a look at you. My garden is right next to your lawn, you know. What a fine party, with only four to come to it?”

And she went off, whistling like a boy.

Hilda was quite unhappy about it all. She thought at first that she would ask her mother to let her have more things to eat at her party; but somehow that didn’t seem very nice, for she didn’t want the children to come to her just because of what they were going to have to eat. So she said nothing; and the next day at three o’clock she was dressed prettily and went out on the rear lawn to receive her guests.

There was a big elm tree on the lawn, and under it was a little table with the big cake all covered up in white tissue paper and with a silver knife beside it. The lawn was as green as an emerald, and the sunlight

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streamed over it like a shower of gold. Pretty soon the four children arrived, all very spick and span.

In a few minutes they had begun to play tether-ball and were shouting and laughing merrily together. After they were tired of that, they took turns on the swing, and then they had games. Finally, when five o'clock came, they began to be very hungry.

"Now," said Hilda, "let's cut the cake."

She took the silver knife in her hand, but just at that moment a great noise was heard on the other side of the fence, and Frieda with about a dozen children rushed down through her garden, singing and laughing. Behind them came a maid with a large tray, partly covered. Frieda climbed up on the fence and began jeering.

"Now you're going to see what *we've* got!" she called out. "Look here!" And she uncovered the tray and showed two large chocolate cakes and a big glass pitcher of

lemonade. The chocolate cake looked ever so good. The chocolate was rich and brown, and oozed out from the layers in the most delicious way. And the lemonade had lumps of ice, and slices of orange, and whole strawberries in it. It would make anybody thirsty to look at it, even if one hadn't been playing in the hot sun as all these children had.

Frieda cut the cake into big pieces and poured the lemonade into the glasses. Even the children in Hilda's party could not help wishing that they were going to have some. Their mouths fairly watered, while the children on Frieda's side of the fence all shouted.

"Now go ahead and cut your old white cake!" cried Frieda. "Let's all see what it was that you asked us to come and get at your party. Ha, ha!"

Hilda was so mortified that she didn't know what to do.

"Stingy! Stingy!" cried Frieda. "Noth-

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ing but old white cake! Go ahead and cut it. We want to see it."

And she climbed up on her side of the fence and jeered and stuck her tongue out at Hilda.

"Won't you please go away, Frieda?" said Hilda piteously. "We weren't bothering you. Why do you want to bother us?"

"Go on and cut your old cake. I want to see what mean things you give at your party. I suppose your mother can't afford to give you anything better. I don't believe you've even got any cake at all. Look at our lovely chocolate cakes, you children!"

And she tilted back and forth on the fence, jeering and making faces. All the other children laughed.

Hilda grew very angry. Her face flushed and she felt that she must not let Frieda go on shaming her. She stepped behind the big elm tree, and began to speak quickly and in a low voice,



At the Fence

“I wish for the splendidest things to eat right away—lots of them—behind the hedge!”

Then she repeated very fast the rhyme which the Elf had taught her. *Ting!* came the little bell-like sound—and then she heard Frieda calling:

“Coward! Coward! Had to run away.”

Hilda came out from behind the elm. She walked up to where Frieda was standing.

“We are going to have *our* things to eat now,” she said. “Down behind the hedge. Come, children!”

She walked to the end of the lawn where there was a thick hedge. Her four guests followed her, and Frieda and the dozen other children went along on the opposite side of the fence.

“I don’t believe she’s got anything at all,” said Frieda. “She’s going to hide so we can’t shame her—— Oh! oh!”

And then every child there just stopped

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and gasped and stared with their eyes as big as saucers and their mouths wide open.

Behind the hedge was set a long round table covered with a snowy linen cloth and glittering with silver and crystal dishes. At one end was a platter with several broiled chickens, nicely carved, and with the marks of the grill all golden brown upon them. At the other end was a wonderful salad nestling in green lettuce leaves and decorated in a way to make you want to keep it as an ornament. There was a chocolate cake as big around as a small hoople, and a wedding cake all iced over with sugar and made to look like a great white temple, and then there was another cake almost as big, with raisins sticking out of it all over the top and sides. In little silverware baskets were cream puffs and chocolate éclairs; and there were pretty glass dishes heaped with marshmallows and caramels and nougats. Others held grapes and oranges and plums; and there were straw-

berries all smashed up in sugar and cream ready to be eaten.

But grandest of all was the centre of the table, where stood Foxy Grandpa himself made out of ice cream, and around him the two boys, and birds and animals, also of ice cream. There was white ice cream and green ice cream and brown ice cream and yellow ice cream—in fact, every kind you could think of; and last of all, two crystal pitchers, one full of plain lemonade and one of pink lemonade with cherries in.

When the hungry children saw all this, they nearly went out of their minds. Even Hilda, who had expected something very wonderful, could scarcely believe her eyes. However, she tried to look as though it was nothing unusual.

“Come,” she said to the four children who were with her, “let’s see how they taste.”

Frieda turned white and then red as she looked on. Her chocolate cakes and her

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lemonade seemed so silly beside all these splendid things. She couldn't say a word. And the children who were with her, when they saw what they had lost, looked at her angrily.

But Hilda turned around and said to them:

“Won't you come over and let's make one party instead of two? Bring your things and we will have them all together.”

The children shouted, and scrambled over the fence like wildcats. Only Frieda hung back and remained silent.

“Please come, Frieda,” said Hilda. “I want you, too. Won't you be friends?”

And then Frieda, for the first time that anyone knew of, burst into tears.

“I can't,” she said. “I've been so bad to you.”

“But you won't be any more, will you?” said Hilda. “Come. I want you most of all.”

And Frieda came. In about ten minutes they had eaten all the chicken and the salad, and were chopping Foxy Grandpa to pieces with gold spoons. It was the biggest feast that any children had ever had in the world.

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That night, as Hilda was going to bed, her mother came into the room and sent the maid away.

“Hilda,” she said, “come and sit in my lap. I want to say something to you. There have been some very strange happenings this year, and I know that you have a secret which you have kept from me.”

Hilda buried her head in her mother's neck. She felt ashamed and a little frightened.

“I heard the other day,” continued her mother, “of how you had made the most beautiful basket that anyone had ever made at the school. But I know very well that you have not learned to make baskets. And the night when I was so very ill you told me

that I should be well in the morning, and it turned out to be true, although the Doctor had said that I could not hope to recover in a long, long time, if I did at all. And now I find that in some way you have had a whole table of all kinds of dainties down on the lawn; for John has just brought in a basketful of very exquisite dishes and gold and silverware. What does it all mean?"

Hilda was very silent and only buried her head down deeper.

"Don't you know, dear, that it's very wrong of you to keep anything from me? I want you to be always frank and honest, and to feel that you can come to me without ever being afraid. So tell me now what your secret is."

Then Hilda began and told the whole story from the beginning—about the spider and the Elf, and how the grass came to turn blue, and the basket, and everything until she had reached the end.

Her mother sat for a long, long time without saying a single word, but just rocking Hilda softly in her arms. At last she said:

“Hilda, it is all very wonderful and hard to believe; yet I cannot help believing it. Only you ought to do as the Elf said and not waste your Wishes on little things. One of your wishes probably saved my life, but the other two Wishes were just childish Wishes. Now, as you think you have two more Wishes left, I want you to promise me truly that you will not use them until you are quite grown up—at least, without telling me and getting my permission. Will you promise?”

“Yes, mamma,” said Hilda; “I promise truly.”

VII

THE LIGHT IN THE KITCHEN.

HILDA was curled up on a heap of cushions in her father's library, which he called his Den. She liked this room better than any other in the house. The walls were lined with books, and over the mantel hung two big swords and a collection of curious pipes; while spurs and hunting-crops and riding-gloves were scattered around in a careless sort of way. In winter a great wood fire was kept blazing on the hearth, and the whole place was so cosy and comfortable, and the cushions on the couch were so soft and fluffy, that Hilda was always delighted when she was allowed to stay there and make herself at home.

On this particular morning Hilda's father had been telling her stories about Sherlock

Holmes. Sherlock Holmes was a famous English detective who could find out everything about you just by looking at you, because he noticed all sorts of little things that no one else ever thought of. If a robbery happened anywhere, the policemen would come to Sherlock Holmes, and after asking them a few questions he would be able to tell them how the robbers had done their work and who they were, and how to catch them. He called this "deducing."

Hilda liked to hear about Sherlock Holmes. Her father told her the stories in such a way that she could see everything just as though it were happening before her very eyes, and she used to get tremendously excited over them; and in the most interesting parts she would jump up and down and clap her hands and scream with delight. No other stories pleased her so much, except those in the Jungle Books.

This morning her father had told her four

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stories, one after the other; for when he once began, she was never willing to let him stop, and kept teasing for another. But this time, after finishing the fourth, he had turned around to his big desk, and said that he had some writing to do.

“Just *one* more.” said Hilda coaxingly. “That last one was *so* splendid!”

“No, Hilda,” said her father; “that’s enough for once. Besides, you ought to go outdoors and have a run in the open air. It stopped raining an hour ago, and the wind is blowing so that the walks are dry.”

“Oh, but it’s so cold outside, and I love it here. Give me some chocolates and I will sit as still as a mouse while you write.”

“Yes, but I haven’t any chocolates.”

“Well, then, one more story.”

“Very well,” said Hilda’s father. “When I was in the Mexican War——”

“Papa!” cried Hilda. “You know you were *never* in the Mexican War! You al-

ways begin that way when you want to tease me."

Hilda's father looked at her very solemnly, though his eyes twinkled.

"Why, how could I tell what happened to me in the Mexican War if I wasn't there?"

"Oh—but the Mexican War was a hundred years ago, and you were only a little baby then."

Hilda's father burst out laughing.

"Well," he said, "that's the only story I can tell you before luncheon time. So, as I said, when I was in the Mexican War——"

But Hilda, who knew her father's ways very well, scrambled out of the cushions and left the Den; and presently she was running about the wet garden-walks with two or three friends of hers who had come over to play with her when they saw her out of doors.

About two hours later she appeared in the Den once more, very rosy from her exercise

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in the high March winds, and with her eyes as bright as stars.

“Now,” she cried, plumping down into the cushions and with a toss of her head like a little princess, “it’s noon, and you ought to tell me another story or else give me some chocolates.”

“But where could I get any chocolates?” said her father, looking very much surprised.

“Oh, maybe you’ve been to the village while I was out. Have you?”

“Why don’t you find out for yourself? Be a Sherlock Holmes. *He* wouldn’t have to ask. He’d be able to tell without asking. Come now, deduce!”

“But I don’t know how you mean. Oh, yes! I’ll hunt around the room to see if I can find any chocolates.”

“No, no,” said her father; “that isn’t deducing. Stay where you are in the cushions, just as Sherlock Holmes would do, and then see if you can tell two things—first, whether

I have been to the village, and next, whether I have brought you any chocolates."

Hilda was greatly puzzled for a moment, but she was also very much interested. It seemed like the beginning of some new and exciting game.

"Use your eyes, and notice everything, and then *think*," said her father, leaning back in his chair and watching the eager little face that peered out of the cushions.

Hilda began to gaze around her and observe each object in the room. She looked at the chairs and shelves and pictures, and then at the rug before the fire, and then the mantel, and then the desk. How was she going to find out? Suddenly her eyes rested on her father, and she gave a little start.

"Oh, now I know you've been out!" she cried. "When I was in here before, you had on your smoking-jacket, and now you've got on your coat. That shows you've been out."

"No," said her father, "that doesn't show

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that I've been out. Perhaps I was only getting ready to go out."

Hilda paused a minute, not knowing what to say. Then she noticed something else.

"Yes, but there's your overcoat lying on the chair. It was downstairs before, and if you were just going out it would be there still. You wouldn't bring it up here. You'd put it on, on your way out."

"Good!" said Hilda's father. "You're getting to be a Sherlock. Yes, I've been out; but how do you know I went to the village? Perhaps I took a walk in the other direction. Come now, deduce some more."

Hilda was puzzled, and her face fell.

"That's too hard," she said, after thinking a moment. "How am I going to tell *where* you went? You oughtn't to expect me to find out just by looking around."

"Sherlock Holmes would find it out just by looking around," replied her father. "Come now, try hard and notice everything."

Hilda felt like giving it up; but she was so interested that she thought she would try once more. This time she didn't gaze around the room very much, but looked very carefully, first at the overcoat, and then at her father, examining him from head to foot.

"Well," she said slowly, "the only thing that I can see is that you have mud on your boots. That doesn't help me any, because I know already that you've been out somewhere—— Oh, yes, it does too!" she cried suddenly. "Yes, it does! Oh! oh!" and she clapped her hands with a scream of delight. "I *know* you've been to the village. There are sidewalks and crosswalks in the other direction, and they are all dry now. But when you go to the village you have to cross over by Bell Street, where there isn't any crosswalk. And the middle of the street is awfully muddy. I've guessed it! I've guessed it!"

"You mean that you've deduced it," said

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her father. "But suppose I did go to the village, how do you know that I brought you any chocolates?"

"Oh, well," said Hilda, with an air of perfect confidence, "I know you wouldn't go to the village without bringing me some chocolates."

Her father lay back in his chair and laughed.

"That's what most people call '*induction*,'" said he. "But you're quite right. I *did* go to the village, and I *did* bring you some chocolates. Now deduce where they are."

"Oh, dear!" complained Hilda. "Have I got to do that, too?"

But she was so interested in this new kind of amusement that she was glad to try it again. So she settled herself down in the cushions once more and looked as wise and every bit as serious as Sherlock Holmes himself.

“Let me see,” she began. “If you hid them, of course I can’t guess—deduce, I mean—where they are. But I don’t believe you’ve done that. So I suppose you brought the box up here, because you were going to give it to me when I came back. . . . I don’t see it anywhere, though. . . . Perhaps you put it in the pocket of your overcoat. . . . No, you don’t like to have the pockets of your overcoat bulge out. You said so the other day. So I think you carried it in your hand. Then when you came in you just put it down anywhere. . . . Yes! yes! You put it on the chair, and then took off your overcoat and threw it down on top of the chocolates. Hurrah! Isn’t that right?”

Hilda’s eyes sparkled with excitement. Her father said nothing, but walked over to the chair and lifted the overcoat. Under it lay a beautiful, long white box tied with a pink ribbon.

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"I deduced it! I deduced it!" cried Hilda, sliding out of the cushions. At that moment the maid opened the door of the Den.

"Luncheon is served, sir," said the maid.

"Come along, Hilda," said her father. "You've earned the chocolates; only don't eat any until after luncheon."

.

Hilda's mother was away from home, making a visit of two days to Aunt Maria; so that evening Hilda was allowed to sit up a good deal later than usual. She loved to sit up late and to have dinner with her father, just as if she were grown up, instead of having it early in the nursery. And after dinner she was not sent to bed at once, but went into the Den and stretched herself out on the rug before the big wood fire.

It was just right, she thought—so warm and comfortable, with the great logs blazing on the hearth. Outside the wind blew hard, for another storm was coming up. But in the

Den it was bright and warm, and the firelight flickered on the swords above the mantelpiece and was reflected from the bronzes on the book-shelves. Best of all, as Hilda thought, her father told her more stories about Sherlock Holmes and of his adventures with robbers, and of how he was nearly killed in a strange place ever so far underground, called the Gas Chamber. Hilda's eyes grew very big while she listened to these stories, and sometimes she was so excited that she forgot to eat her chocolates. At last, however, her father happened to look at the clock and noticed how late it was.

"Why, Hilda!" he cried. "It's after nine o'clock. You must be off to bed this very minute!"

And she barely had time to swallow the last bit of chocolate, when he picked her up and carried her to her own little room at the end of the long hall. There the maid had been waiting for her ever so long, and very

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soon she was tucked up in bed, and was left to fall asleep.

Now, it would have been better if Hilda had been put to bed at the regular hour and had not sat up for dinner, and if her father had not told her such exciting stories and let her eat chocolates until nine o'clock. Her mother would have been wiser than that; but a man is always more careless about children and just likes to give them a good time, never stopping to think of what is really best for them.

So it happened that after Hilda had been tucked up in bed and the light had been turned out, she could not get to sleep for a long while. Her mind was very wide awake, and her thoughts were full of robbers and thieves and gas-chambers. When she did finally fall asleep, she dreamed all sorts of things and was very restless, turning over in the bed again and again.

All of a sudden she woke with a jump.

What was that? It sounded like stealthy steps in the hall. She sat straight up in bed and listened, for she was now quite wide awake. The room was so dark as to be black; and even when she turned toward where the window was, she could not see the faintest light. Outside the wind moaned and the sleet rattled on the window-pane. But Hilda was quite sure that she had heard someone walking very softly.

She got out of her bed as still as she could and opened the door into the hall. Everything was as black as ink. She listened. Nothing at first; then a sort of clanking sound from below, in the direction of the kitchen.

Hilda crept through the hall to the head of the back stairs and peered down them. From the keyhole in the kitchen door came a faint glimmer of light. Someone must be there.

“Nobody ought to be there in the middle

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of the night," thought Hilda. "If anyone is in there, it must be a robber."

She stole softly back through the hall until she came to the door of her father's room, for she knew her way about in the dark just like a little mouse. The door was half open. Hilda went in and felt her way up to the bed. Then she put her hands out until she found her father's face. He was sound asleep, and Hilda moved his head back and forth gently to waken him. Pretty soon he stirred, and said sleepily:

"Oh, I say! What's the matter?"

"S-s-sh!" said Hilda in his ear. "Papa, you mustn't speak loud. There's a robber downstairs."

Hilda's father was now wide awake.

"What?" he whispered back. "A robber? Where?"

"In the kitchen," answered Hilda. "There's a light there. I saw it, and heard someone."



"Well," whispered he, "You mustn't freeze to death, even if there is. Just creep in here under the covers, and I'll go and see what's up."

So Hilda crawled into the nice warm place, which she was glad enough to do, for her little feet were as cold as ice. Her father got up and lit a tiny night-light. Then he put on a big heavy bathrobe and slippers. Hilda watched him with great excitement. She was not a bit afraid now, for she felt that her father could manage a robber, or any number of robbers. It was the most interesting thing that had ever happened in her life.

Meanwhile, her father went across the hall to the Den, and came back with one of the swords that hung over the mantel.

"I'm sorry I haven't any cartridges for my revolver," he whispered. "But this'll do, I think. You stay where you are, Hilda, and don't be afraid."

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Then he covered the night-light with a newspaper, and stole out into the darkness of the hall. He went to the head of the back stairs and listened. Sure enough, someone was in the kitchen. With the heavy sword in his hand, he went down the stairs, one step at a time, so as not to make any noise. At last he reached the door.

“Now,” said he to himself, “I’ll slam the door open, and bang in on him with the sword, and get him before he has a chance to run or shoot.”

He turned the knob very quietly, and then burst into the kitchen, sword in hand.

There was a wild howl, and a woman’s voice cried:

“Och, murther! Sure, I’m kilt!”

Hilda’s father stopped short, and gave one look around him. A kerosene lamp stood on the kitchen table, and by its light, Lizzie, the cook, was making a fire in the range. She had had her hands full of kindling wood,

which she had dropped all over the floor when Hilda's father rushed in.

"What are you doing here in the middle of the night?" he asked sternly.

"Middle of the night, is it?" returned Lizzie, with a sniff. "Sure it's foive o'clock, and I was afther makin' the fire early, bekase it's wash-day."

Hilda's father looked at the kitchen clock, which showed that it was really after five o'clock. The stormy winter morning had made the house so dark that it seemed like midnight. He felt very foolish, standing there in his bathrobe, with feet slippered and a big sword in his hand.

"Good gracious!" he cried, and then turned and hurried back up the stairs to where Hilda lay, nestled down in the bed.

"Oh, papa!" she cried; "did you capture the robber? Where is he?"

"Bother the robber!" he said, as he threw the sword into one corner of the room and

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uncovered the light. "It was only Lizzie making the fire, and it's five o'clock. What on earth made you think there was a robber?"

"Why," said Hilda simply; "I—I deduced it."

Her father sat down on the side of the bed and laughed till he was out of breath.

"Well," he said at last, "that comes of telling you about Sherlock Holmes. I must have looked like a wild idiot. Now, Hilda, you'd better go back to bed and let us finish our sleep. It's three hours yet before breakfast."

But Hilda felt very comfortable where she was. So she said coaxingly:

"Oh, well, if it's really morning, you can tell me some more stories from now till breakfast-time. It's nice and warm here."

"Not a story!" said her father. "I want the rest of my sleep after that adventure."

“Oh, please, papa,” said Hilda; “just one story, and then I’ll go.”

“All right,” he answered. “I suppose I’ll have to. So here goes. When I was in the Mexican War——”

“Papa!” cried Hilda, who knew his ways very well. “You’re just too mean for anything!”

And then she pulled his hair and kissed him, and climbed out of the bed and scampered back to her own room at the end of the hall.

VIII

GRIMGRIM

AS Hilda grew older, she used to walk much further than the meadow where she had met the Elf. In time she almost forgot about the Elf, though whenever she passed that corner of the meadow she always looked at it for a moment. The big stone with which she had smashed the spider was there still; only now, in summer, it was almost hidden by the grass and burdock leaves that had grown up around it.

But this was only the starting-point for her rambles into the fields and the deep woods beyond them. She liked to go out with other children, but she never went with them into these shady nooks. Somehow she felt that it was nice to have some places all to herself. She was never lonely there,

but she called to the birds and bees and the little squirrels, as though they were all friends of hers. At first she went only a little way into the woods. She did not wish to get lost. After a while, however, she went further and further, and felt very much at home among the tall ferns, and among the trees that grew so close together in the inner forest. She wound her way through dense thickets, and crossed little brooks on stepping-stones, and she loved the fragrance of everything that grew and budded and blossomed.

One day she was sitting under a tall, shady tree, busily putting together a great cluster of wild flowers which she had gathered, when she heard a strange sound. It was like a hoarse cry, and then turned into a sort of snarl. Hilda listened, and heard it again and again.

“I wonder what that can be,” she said to herself. “It must be some animal, only I

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never knew any animal that made a noise like that."

The cry and snarl came once again right out of the thickest of the woods.

"Well, anyhow," said Hilda, "I'll go and see."

So she put her flowers down, and began to push aside the thick bushes. The sharp cry came louder than before. Hilda broke her way through the thicket, and found herself in an open glade which was echoing with the strange noise. But now she could see just what had made it. In the midst of a cluster of ferns crouched an enormous cat, as black as coal, and with eyes that looked like circles of green fire. The cat seemed to be trying to leap into the air, but something held it back, so that every time it leaped, it gave a fearful screech, and then snarled as fiercely as a tiger. When it saw Hilda, it opened its mouth and showed two rows of glittering teeth and a long red tongue, and

this time it tried to leap at Hilda. But the same thing that held it back before still held it back, and it could not get at the child.

“Goody!” said Hilda. “What a big cat! And what’s making it so cross?”

For Hilda liked cats, and knew their ways, and never teased them. So she wasn’t afraid, even though this cat was big and black and fierce. She walked carefully around it and tried to find out what had happened to it. Pretty soon, as the creature gave a leap and fell back, Hilda saw that a steel chain was fastened to one of its legs.

“Ah, now I know!” cried Hilda. “The poor thing has been caught in one of those horrid weasel traps that the huntsman sets. De-e-ar me! And the cat thinks *I* set it. That’s why he’s jumping at me so. Now what am I going to do? He looks as if he’d eat me up, when all I want is to help him get out.”

The cat stopped leaping as Hilda spoke,

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but he glared at her fearfully, and crouched as if ready to spring again.

“Well,” said Hilda, “I’ll tell him how it is, and then I’ll try and get him out of the trap. I don’t believe he’ll think I had anything to do with it then.”

So in her wise little way she stood in front of the cat and explained all about how the men had set the trap for weasels, and how she herself had nothing to do with it, but that she was going to try her best to unfasten the trap.

The cat flattened his ears and ran out his claws—they were terribly long sharp claws—but he kept very still. Perhaps he thought he would wait until he saw what was going to happen. Anyway, as soon as Hilda had finished what she had to say, she walked straight up to the cat and, bending over him, poked her hands down into the ferns to find the trap.

The cat quivered all over, but did not move.

“Ah!” said Hilda, “there’s the chain, and the big iron teeth that have got your poor leg so fast. Oh, how it must hurt! Wait, now, and let me see if I can pull the things apart.”

The cat’s leg was caught in a sort of steel jaw that gripped it between two rows of jagged teeth. Hilda had good strong arms, and she pulled with all her might. The cat gave a dreadful yell of pain. But at the same minute the steel jaw opened, and—whir-r-r!—away went the cat, as if he had been shot out of a gun. He zipped through the bushes so fast that Hilda could see only a streak of black for half a second, and then the animal was gone.

“Well!” said she, looking in its direction, “wasn’t that the strangest thing! I think he might have stayed a minute and let me bathe his paw in the brook. But what an e-nor-mous cat he was! As big as any two cats that I ever saw.”

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But pretty soon Hilda gathered up her flowers and arranged them, and then went home as usual. She told her mother what had happened and then forgot all about it.

About two months later she started out early in the afternoon for a long trudge through the woods. The air was crisp, but the sun shone gloriously. She felt like going further than she had ever gone before, and she thought that perhaps she might find some hazel-nuts. She paddled in the brook and caught three or four turtles, with yellow dots on their black shells. She tried to scoop up a minnow or two in her hands, but they were too quick for her. In this way she wandered on and on, until she met the huntsman walking through the woods.

“Hullo, little girl,” said he, in a deep-toned voice, “aren’t you pretty far from home?”

“Yes,” said Hilda, “but I know the woods.”

“Well,” said he, “don’t go much further *that* way.” And he pointed down a long, thick-shaded sort of avenue in the forest, where the trees made a long arch.

“Why not?” asked Hilda, catching at a butterfly.

“Oh—well—because it’s better not. Promise me.”

“I haven’t time to go any further,” said Hilda; “for I must be home to dinner.”

“All right,” said the huntsman. “Remember.”

After he had gone she wondered why he had told her not to go down the dark avenue. The more she wondered, the more curious she became. So she thought to herself that she would go down there just a little way to see if there was anything remarkable. The dark avenue was so shaded that the sunlight barely entered it at any time, and now that it was late in the afternoon the place was very gloomy. No birds sang there, and the

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stillness was strangely unlike the woods that Hilda knew. Yet she kept walking on, rather slowly, but still bound that she would see what was at the end. Pretty soon she heard a rustling in the leaves beside her, and a forest child—a young boy—darted out and took her by the arm.

“What is it?” asked Hilda, much surprised.

But the boy only pointed down the glade, and motioned to her to go back, shaking his head.

“What is down there?” said Hilda; for she was puzzled by the way in which the boy acted.

He gave her no answer, but made a quick sign on his forehead and his breast, and then vanished into the thicket again, and was gone.

“Well, I think that’s very queer,” said Hilda.

She hesitated for a moment, but then de-

cided to go on, for it looked as though there was more light in front of her, and as though some of the trees had been cleared away. And she found that this was so. A few more steps brought her to an open place, where there was a sort of large hut with a steep roof. No one seemed to be in it, though, for it was very still. As Hilda looked, she saw in front of the door of the hut a circle traced upon the ground by a dull grey line.

“There must be some children here,” said Hilda to herself. “That ring looks as though they played games in it.”

She went on a little further and stepped inside the circle on the ground. All at once the dull grey line disappeared, and in place of it there sprang up toadstools and curious plants, and tiny wriggling snakes. At the same moment, the door of the hut flew open and a tall old woman came out. She was dressed in a red cloak and wore a pointed

hat. Her face was puckered up in a kind of grin when she saw Hilda.

Hilda, as soon as the little snakes began to writhe in the circle around her, turned and tried to hurry away. But a strange power held her fast. Do what she would, she couldn't get out of the circle. Her legs wouldn't move, and she felt as if she were rooted to the ground.

"No, no," said the old woman, in a strange, croaking voice; "those who come to my house cannot leave it when they wish. You will stay a while with me, my pretty miss—perhaps longer than you think."

"Oh, please let me go!" cried Hilda. "*I must go home.*"

"No, no, no," replied the old woman, grinning still more, and squatting down beside the circle. "Look at me, my pretty miss, and tell me what you think I am."

Hilda looked at her red cloak, her peaked hat and leering face, and remembered some



The Witch's Circle

pictures in one of her story-books which told about a woman who looked like this one.

“I—I—think,” she said, faltering a little, “I think you must be a—a—witch.”

The old woman grinned more than ever.

“Ah, you know, do you?” said she. “And you wanted to visit me, did you?”

“No, I didn’t,” answered Hilda. “I never heard that you lived here.”

“But you came,” said the Witch; “and you are here. The huntsman told you not to come, and the forest child warned you; yet you had your own way.”

“Please, please, *please* let me go,” begged Hilda.

“No, no, no,” croaked the Witch. “Little girls who come to see me never go away. Many things happen to them, but never that. They never go away.”

“But what *will* happen to me?” asked Hilda piteously.

“That we shall see,” said the Witch.

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“That will depend on Grimgrim’s sign. Come, Grimgrim! Come, Grimgrim!” And she gave a gurgling whistle.

Instantly there bounded out of the house a huge black cat, with enormous green eyes. Hilda knew him at once. He was the cat that had been trapped in the weasel-trap.

“Come, Grimgrim,” said the Witch, looking fondly at the beast. “Here’s a pretty miss come to see us. She wants to know what will happen to her. Give me a sign, Grimgrim, by teeth or claws, or by the bristling tail. Give me a sign!”

The monstrous cat leaped into the circle. It glared at Hilda for a moment out of its green eyes, and then it sniffed at her skirt. The Witch looked on, leering. Suddenly the cat arched its back and began rubbing its head against Hilda’s knees, walking slowly round and round, and purring a low hoarse purr like the sound of a bass-drum when you rub it. As he did so, the toadstools and

snakes disappeared, and the dull grey line of the circle came back again.

The Witch leaped to her feet.

“What does this mean, Grimgrim?” screeched she. “You never gave me such a sign as this before!”

The great cat mewed and mewed—a mew beginning with a short, sharp cry and ending in a long howl.

“Ah-h-h!” said the Witch, “was it she who did it? Ah-h! Then, come, little miss, out of the ring. You are free to come and to go, for you were brave enough and kind enough to save my Grimgrim.”

Hilda stepped out of the circle and looked at the Witch, whose face no longer grinned and leered. She seemed very pleasant.

“Do not be afraid,” said the Witch. “You shall be safe.”

“I’m not afraid, now,” answered Hilda, who was, indeed, much interested.

“Will you come into my hut?” asked the

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Witch. "No one else ever came here and went away again, except up through the air. But you are different."

Hilda was very curious to see what a witch's hut was like; so she walked in, followed by the Witch and by Grimgrim, who still kept purring. The hut was very plainly furnished. There was an open fireplace, a few chairs, and around the wall hung kettles and pans and several broomsticks. As Hilda went in at the door a chair moved out from its place by the wall and slid up to her all by itself.

"Goodness!" cried Hilda, much surprised. But she sat down in it politely.

"You must be tired," said the Witch, "and hungry. You've had nothing but a few hazel-nuts."

"Why, yes," said Hilda. "How did you know?"

"Because I am a Witch. But, dear me! Dear me! What is this? I smell magic."

She began sniffing in every direction, and then she chanted to herself:

“ Magic, magic in the air,
Magic, magic here and there,
Magic, magic more than mine—
Magic, magic, show the sign!”

“ What is it?” asked Hilda. But the Witch kept moving about, and crooning over and over the words:

“ Magic, magic more than mine,
Magic, magic, where’s the sign?”

Suddenly she stopped and bent over Hilda. “ Why, it’s you!” she cried.

Then she ran her long skinny hand down Hilda’s arm.

“ Hold up your hand!” she ordered.

Hilda held up her hand. The ring on it shone like fire.

“ Ha!” exclaimed the Witch. “ I knew! I knew! I knew!”

“ Magic, magic more than mine,
Magic, magic, here’s the sign!”

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“Why, what do you mean?” asked Hilda.

“Where did you get that ring?”

“Oh, I’ve always had it, ever since I was a little baby.”

The Witch gave her a strange look, and then backed away.

“Yes,” said she, “I understand, though you do not. But come! We must have a fire. It is growing cool.”

On the fireplace was a pile of logs, but there was no fire. The Witch took a broomstick and touched the logs. At once a bright flame flared out of them, and they began to blaze and crackle. She waved her broomstick twice, and a big iron kettle sailed down from the wall and took its place just over the fire. There was nothing to hold it up, but it stayed there in the air all by itself.

“Now,” said the Witch, “you have come far and are hungry. You will sup with me.”

“Oh, no,” said Hilda, who was not sure

that it was wise to eat a witch's food. "I—I'm not very hungry, and I'd better go."

"Wait," said the Witch.

She touched the top of the kettle with her broomstick, and a faint steam began to rise from it. Then she slowly crooned:

"Who will taste of the Witch's fare?
Chicken and duck and lamb and hare,
Turnips and onions, not a few,
Simmer and sizzle and steam and stew.
Plenty of peppers are in the pot,
Making it rich and piping hot.
Chicken and duck and lamb and hare—
Who will taste of the Witch's fare?"

As she crooned, the steam from the kettle came thicker and faster, and there was a sound of things stewing inside. The smell of the stew was ever so good, and Hilda's hunger became very sharp. Grimgrim sat down by the fire and licked his chops, as he sniffed the savoury smell.

"Now," said the Witch, "it is ready."

A thick oak table slid into the middle of the room. A bluish bowl, a small platter, and

a knife, fork, and spoon came from somewhere and settled down on the table. The Witch seized a great wooden spoon and stirred the stew in the kettle; and then, taking up the bowl, began to ladle out the stew into it. The smell of it was still more delicious than before, and when Hilda had a platter full of it before her she didn't stop to ask any questions, but just ate and ate, for she was fairly ravenous. A piece of buttered brown bread appeared beside her platter, and she ate it with the stew. As soon as she bit a piece out of it, another came in its place, so that when she had eaten all that she could possibly hold, the bread was there just as though she had not touched it. She leaned back with a sigh of contentment. She felt so comfortable and well fed and warm by the blazing fire.

"Thank you so much for the supper, Witch," she said. "May I give Grimgrim the bones?"

She gave a whole platter of bones and

pieces of meat to Grimgrim, and then turned around toward the door. It was partly open and Hilda gave a cry of surprise.

“Why!” she exclaimed. “It’s all dark! I didn’t dream it was getting so late.”

“Never mind,” said the Witch, “you shall reach home safely. But before you go I must give you something. One whom you do not know has given you a gift, and some day she will give you more. Another has also given you five gifts, of which two still remain. I, for the sake of my familiar, Grimgrim, will give you still another gift, though my magic is less. Close your eyes.”

Hilda closed her eyes. The Witch placed her thumbs on the closed lids. Then she said:

“By the power of my thumbs,
Fear you not, whatever comes.
Look into the angry eye,
Then its harm shall pass you by.”

“There! Open your eyes and go your way,” concluded the Witch.

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“But, Witch,” said Hilda, “it is all dark. I can find my way through the woods in the daytime, but in the dark I shall get lost, and my papa and mamma won’t know where I am.”

“Oh,” said the Witch, “you must follow the Moving Light.”

“What is the Moving Light?”

“Come, and I will show you.”

They both went out of the door. The night was pitchy dark in the woods. Hilda could not see her hand before her face. The Witch gave a strange call, and instantly on the ground, right in front of Hilda, there was a spot of bright yellow light.

“Follow that,” said the Witch. “Don’t be afraid. You need not take any care, but just follow on. Only don’t look around.”

Hilda took a step forward, and at once the spot of light began to move. She walked fast, and the Moving Light went faster. She walked slowly, and the Moving Light

went slower. She stopped, and the Light stopped.

“Good-night, Witch,” called Hilda as she passed into the darkness. “And good-night, Grimgrim!”

On glided the Moving Light; and, though Hilda could not see anything but the glowing spot on the ground, she went swiftly through the forest. Not a single branch brushed her in the face. Not a stone or moss-hillock or fallen trunk tripped her up. She walked as easily as though she had been upon a smooth and level road. She kept her eyes fixed on the Moving Light, on, and on, and on, until she was dismayed to see it suddenly disappear in the gloom.

“Oh, dear!” cried Hilda. “Why has it left me? What am I going to do now?”

But as she spoke she looked up, and there in front of her was a house, from whose windows many lights streamed cheerily out into the blackness.

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“Why,” said Hilda, amazed, “why—it’s—no, it isn’t—yes, it is—it’s *my* house!”

And, sure enough, it was. She ran to the door, and then right into the arms of her father.

“Wherever have you been so late?” asked he. And her mother, coming out of the dining-room, caught Hilda close to her and began to cry.

“Oh, it’s all right,” said Hilda. “I’ve just been in the woods.”

“In the woods at night?” said her father, whistling with surprise. “Well! I’m glad I didn’t know, or I should have been as worried as your mother. However, you must be starved, so come in and have some dinner.”

“Oh, I’ve had dinner. I—er——” And then Hilda stopped, and became confused.

“Had dinner? In the woods?” said her father, raising his eyebrows. “Where would you get dinner in the woods?”

Hilda hardly knew how to tell the story,

but presently she went into the Den, and there, curled up in the cushions, she did tell everything that she could remember. Neither her father nor her mother spoke a single word.

“There!” said she, at the end, “that’s all. I wasn’t much afraid at any time. And I don’t think the Witch is really bad. But what did she mean about ‘magic more than mine,’ and why did she make me hold up my ring for her to see? I didn’t understand that at all.”

Her father and mother looked at each other in silence. Then her mother said gently:

“Some day, when you are older, I will tell you what she meant. But to-night you must be a tired little girl; so come upstairs with me, since you’ve had your dinner, and get a good long sleep. It’s after bedtime, dear.”

Later in the evening, when Hilda was

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fast asleep, her mother came down and said:

“Now, don’t you think it’s terrible to let the child go roaming about in the way she does? It makes my heart stand still when I think of what might have happened to her.”

But her father answered, quite contentedly:

“No. If it were any other child, I should be afraid. But I’m absolutely sure that, no matter where she goes, no harm will ever come to Hilda.”

IX

HILDA MAKES A NEW FRIEND

“**I** NEVER saw such a stuck-up girl as you are, Hilda!”

This is what Frieda said one morning as she stopped by the verandah of Hilda's home to speak with her.

“Why, what do you mean, Frieda? I'm not a bit stuck up.”

“Yes, you are. You give yourself such airs. You never ask me to go anywhere with you. Just as if you had anything to be so proud about!”

After the party on the lawn, years before, when Hilda had used her third Wish, Frieda had given up trying to make Hilda unhappy, openly, or in any rough ways. For a while she was ashamed of herself, and all the other children had grown so fond of Hilda that they would not join in any plan to tease her,

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or give her trouble. But Frieda was still as jealous of her as ever, and often said unpleasant things behind her back, and sometimes even to her face. Hilda knew all this quite well, but she was very sweet-tempered and did not try to pay Frieda back. Only she did not have much to do with her; and it was true that she never asked her to any parties, or to walk or ride, when she got her friends together. As the two girls grew older, this made Frieda very hateful in her heart. Hilda was prettier and everyone liked her, because she was so friendly and generous; while no one cared for Frieda very long. She was not a bad-looking girl, but she had a sharp tongue, and wanted always to have her own way. So she had no real friends; and when she saw how much Hilda was loved, she could hardly bear it.

On this particular morning she had stopped in front of Hilda's house and called out to know whether Hilda was going to walk.

Hilda said she hadn't decided. Then Frieda had said:

"I never saw such a stuck-up girl as you are!"

Frieda knew that Hilda would not ask her to walk, but she was bound to hurt her feelings if she could. So she went on, with a sneer:

"You're just as plain as a pie-plate. You haven't anything to say but just silly little prattle, like a baby's. And yet you act as if you were a grand lady, putting on all kinds of airs. Dear me! The Princess Hilda!" And Frieda made a low curtsy, laughing in a scornful sort of way. "All the girls think you are too conceited to live!"

This was quite untrue, for Hilda was not a bit conceited, and no one thought that she was. But when Frieda said this, it hurt.

"I don't want to talk about it any more," said Hilda. And she got up from her chair and went into the house.

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“Well, it’s true!” called Frieda after her.

Hilda was sure that Frieda was only saying this for spite; yet the taunts troubled her all the same.

“Am I stuck up?” she asked herself. “Do the girls really think I put on airs?”

No girl likes to feel that everyone is thinking unkind things about her, and Hilda could not easily forget Frieda’s words.

“I wonder,” she thought, “whether a girl who had never seen me before would like me. She wouldn’t have to pretend to if she really didn’t.”

She sighed, and put on her hat, and went down through the garden, and out into the road. She had no special reason for going there. She just wanted to get out into the sunshine, and away from all thought of Frieda.

Pretty soon the road led her between rows of big country trees—elms and maples and

oaks. The sidewalks ended, and she walked in the long grass beside the road. The sweet, fresh air did her good, and she went briskly along. Presently, as she entered a thickly shaded part of the road where there were woods on each side she heard, a long way off, the sound of a galloping horse. As it came nearer, it changed to a trot. Hilda sat down on a stone and waited to see the horse go by. Her father had promised her a pony for her fifteenth birthday, but she was only fourteen now.

Pretty soon, down the road, came a great black horse ridden by a tall girl with beautiful golden hair. A big dog ran close beside the horse. Just as they passed Hilda, the girl cried out:

“Whoa, Rex! I’ve lost my girdle.”

The big horse stopped at once. Then the girl said:

“Run back, Towser, and find my girdle for me, and bring it here.”

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The dog barked three times, and scurried back up the road further into the woods.

"You didn't see it drop off, did you?" said the girl to Hilda, looking all about her on the ground. "I've only just missed it."

"No," said Hilda, "what was it like?"

"Oh, it was of twisted gold—very curiously made."

"And how does your dog know what you want him to do? He seemed to understand as soon as you spoke to him."

"Yes, indeed," said the girl. "He understands everything that I say to him. Ah! Here he is now, coming back."

They heard a muffled bark, and in a moment the dog came galloping down the road with a shining circle in his mouth. He stopped when he reached the girl on the horse, and looked up at her, wagging his tail.

"Thank you, Towser," said the girl. And then she added to Hilda: "I think I'll have

to get down so as to fasten the girdle on again."

She slid from her horse.

"Rex," she said, "you may walk up the road for a little way and eat the clover along the fence, while I put on my belt."

The big horse neighed, and went slowly off, nosing out the clusters of clover, and nibbling at them with great satisfaction.

"Why," said Hilda, "the horse understands you, too, and minds you!"

"Yes. Now, dear, will you help me arrange this girdle?"

It was a beautiful girdle of braided gold strands twisted together in a very quaint pattern.

Hilda admired it very much.

"Yes, it *is* pretty," said the girl. "It was given to me by—by—by a friend."

"What were you going to say?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I have had some strange adventures happen to me since I was

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a very little girl. But you wouldn't believe them if I told you about them."

"Yes, I would," said Hilda; "for I've had some strange things happen to me, too."

"Well, not so strange as *I* have," returned the girl, sitting down on a hillock of grass. "I don't believe that you ever saw any real Brownies."

"No-o, but I've seen a real Elf, and talked to him."

"Have you, really?" said the girl, much interested. "But you've never seen a great big Giant."

"No," replied Hilda, "but I've seen a Witch."

"Dear me!" cried the girl. "I thought nobody else but me had such things happen. Will you tell me all about it? And then I'll tell you. Come, sit down by me. And I want to know your name, for I feel I shall love you."

Hilda blushed with pleasure.

"My name is Hilda," she said.

"Oh, what a lovely name! My name is Mabel; and I'm so glad to have you for a friend, for I know hardly any girls. The only one I ever played with a great deal was a giant girl named Elsie; but she's gone away now."

"A giant girl? Where has she gone?"

"Oh, her father, Cormoran, has a lot of castles, and he lives sometimes in one and sometimes in another. He lived not so very far away from my home for a long time; but now he's in a castle hundreds of miles away. And Elsie, of course, went with him."

"You must be awfully sorry."

"Yes, for she was *dear*. But, after all, she finally grew so big that we couldn't have much fun together. She couldn't hear me when I spoke to her, because her head was so high in the air, and I didn't like to scream up at her all the time. And when she picked me up and held me near her face, she would

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almost squeeze me into a jelly. Of course, she didn't mean to, only she didn't know how strong she was and how it hurt to have her pinch me with her fingers."

"How tall was she?" asked Hilda, who was tremendously interested.

"Oh, pretty nearly as tall as a church steeple. When I first knew her she was quite small—about eight feet high—but she grew awfully fast after she began. The giant doctor said that she outgrew her strength, and he used to give her pills as big as footballs; but she was too strong for *me!*"

"Oh, I wish I could see the castle some time!" exclaimed Hilda.

"Why, so you can, if you'll come and visit me. And I'll show you lots of other things. But now tell me about the Elf and the Witch."

So Hilda told her story, and all about the Witch. Mabel asked ever so many questions.

“What did she mean when she put her thumbs on your eyelids and said, ‘Look into the angry eye’?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Hilda.

“Well,” replied Mabel, “I fancy you’ll know some time, for the Witch meant it for a sort of gift.”

“Maybe,” said Hilda. “But now you tell me about the Brownies.”

So Mabel began and told all about the Brownies’ Cave, and the King Brownie and the jar of Brownie jelly, and a great many things that perhaps you may have read of in another book. The two girls chatted together for the longest time, and finally walked on for a long distance over the forest road. But at last Hilda said:

“Oh, I really must go home now, for it’s luncheon-time or even later.”

“Must you really go?” asked Mabel.

“Why, we haven’t begun to talk yet. I am so glad I met you, for I know I am going to

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love you very much. You must come as soon as ever you can to my house. Grandma will make you welcome, and I will show you Walter's goat, and we can both ride on Rex as far as the Giant's Castle. You can't miss our house. You keep straight on this road till you pass the Cross Dog's house, and just before you come to the Frog's Brook. Oh, I didn't tell you about that, did I? Well, I will next time. Now, good-bye, dear."

"And you must ride over to my house," said Hilda. "But—look, Mabel! What is that in the bushes on the other side of the fence? I saw two big eyes, and a furry face through the leaves. It was some kind of an animal."

"Oh," said Mabel, "that must be the Good Wolf that I told you about. He often follows me when I ride; but he keeps among the bushes, because he doesn't like to be seen by human beings. But he is awfully good. Well, now, good-bye."

She put both her arms around Hilda's neck and kissed her. Then she gave a swift leap and was in the saddle. A moment later and she and Rex and Towser were lost to sight, and the sound of hoofs grew fainter and fainter in the distance.

Hilda was so pleased that she clapped her hands with delight.

"There!" she said. "Mabel never saw me before, and she likes me awfully, just as I like her. I don't believe a word of what Frieda said. Won't it be lovely to have such a chum as that! But, gracious! I must hurry home!

To save time she hurried into the woods, for she could go across them by a path that was shorter than the road. The place where she entered the woods was near the bushes through which she had seen the two big eyes and the furry face. She had forgotten all about them, because Mabel had told her that they were the eyes and face of the Good

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Wolf who was hiding there. But unfortunately, it was really the Bad Wolf. He had long made it a habit to skulk about where Mabel rode.

He could not touch Mabel, for she knew the Call of the Animals; but he was always hoping that some other person might be with her and that he might be able to get this person into his power. He had waited long, and often he had snarled hungrily when no one came. But now the very thing that he had hoped for was happening. A nice plump girl was coming through the woods where he lay in wait. He ran out his long, red tongue and licked his chops greedily.

Hilda went into the woods with a swift, eager step. She had not gone far before she heard a sort of swift patter on the leaves behind her. She turned, and there was the Bad Wolf.

For a moment her heart almost stopped beating, for he was a frightful-looking crea-

ture. His fur was mangy and hung from his skin in great tufts. His eyes glowed like coals. His huge mouth was wide open, and his jagged teeth gleamed yellow as he gave a long, savage growl. He drew near Hilda step by step as she stood facing him. He was not only eager to eat her, he was cruel as well. He longed to terrify her as much as he could before he finally dragged her down. So he reared himself on his hind legs and thrust his bony head forward almost into her face.

Somehow, just at that moment, there flashed across Hilda's mind the words "Look into the angry eye." Her fear seemed all at once to vanish. She drew herself up to her full height, and instead of shrinking back from the hideous wolf-face, she leaned forward and looked down into the two red eyes. It was as if she had thrust a white-hot poker into them. The Bad Wolf leaped back with a howl and cowered on the ground, shivering

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all over. Then he turned and began moving slowly away.

“Go home!” cried Hilda, just as if she were speaking to a dog.

But the Bad Wolf was not to get off so easily. As he slunk away, there shot through the trees something that looked like a big, black furry thunderbolt. Whiz! It landed exactly on the Bad Wolf’s head. It uttered a fearful screech, and a moment later the Bad Wolf gave a terrible cry of pain. Hilda looked hard for a second and then she understood. It was Grimgrim. His teeth were sunk into the Bad Wolf’s head and his great claws were at work like a buzz-saw. It was all over in a few minutes, for the Bad Wolf gave one leap into the thicket and ran for dear life to the den where he lived with his cub, leaving Hilda to go home in peace, much excited by her adventure and by finding out what the Witch’s gift had meant.

Three or four days afterwards, the Fox

met the Bad Wolf and noticed that he had lost an eye.

“Aha!” said the Fox. “This reminds me of old times. Been falling off a fence again and getting into a bramble bush?”

“Yes,” growled the Bad Wolf, trying to pass hastily by.

“Oh,” said the Fox, “you needn’t think I don’t know perfectly well what you’ve been at. Last time, you tried to kill the Farmer’s little son. This time, I suppose you’ve tried to catch some other child. Well, I advise you to stop it; for if you lose your other eye and become blind, the rest of the wolves will kill and eat you. That is the Law of the Wolves.”

The Bad Wolf knew this very well, and fear was in his heart. So never again did he try to harm a child; and not long afterwards he gave up hunting altogether, and made his cub go out and kill for both of them. For the cub had now grown to be a full-sized wolf.

X

FRIEDA PLANS MISCHIEF

HILDA and Mabel became the best friends in the world. Mabel would ride over on Rex to Hilda's house, and the two girls would have all sorts of fine times together; and after Hilda had a pony given her on her fifteenth birthday, she used often to go cantering through the woods to spend the day with Mabel. Together they rode about the country, past the Cross Dog's house, and by the Kitty Cat's, and where the Mooly Cow lived, and across the Frog's Bridge. Several times they took the long ride to the Giant's Castle, but it was now closed and silent. The great crimson flag no longer floated from its central tower, and the immense gates were barred. The men in red still worked in the fields, and everything

was kept in perfect order for the time when the Giant would return. These men in red always saluted Mabel most respectfully, for they knew that she was a friend of the Giant's daughter.

Altogether these years were very pleasant to Hilda. She was well and strong and she had many friends, though the dearest of all was Mabel. Since the day when Frieda had broken out into such a bad temper, Hilda had even less to do with her. She was always polite to her when they met, but she knew that Frieda hated her. So the days and months went on, until at last Hilda had grown so tall that the time came for her to let her skirts down and to put her hair up, for she was nearing her eighteenth birthday. She was no longer a child, but had reached womanhood—a sweet and dainty and wise young maiden, whom you would turn around to look at when you passed her.

One day her mother called her into the

library and said that she wished to speak with her.

“Sit down, please, dear; and let me shut the door before I begin to talk to you.”

“Why, mamma, how serious you look! If I hadn’t such a good conscience, I should think you were going to scold me.”

“No, darling, not that. But there is something that I must tell you, and yet I don’t know just what to say about it. It seems so impossible, and yet I can’t help believing in it.”

“Dear me! I can believe lots of things that most people can’t, because strange things have happened to me—and to Mabel, too,” she added thoughtfully.

“Well,” said her mother, “what I am going to tell you is the strangest of all, and the end of it hasn’t happened to you even yet.”

“Oh, *please* tell me!” cried Hilda. “Is it a secret? I’m just wild to know.”

"I shouldn't tell you now," said her mother, "except that next week you will be eighteen years of age, and you will see presently why I ought to prepare you for something or other—I don't know just what—which may happen."

"Goodness! How mysterious!" exclaimed Hilda. "Don't stop, but tell me quick!"

"Look at the ring that you wear on your finger," said her mother. "Do you know how long you have worn it?"

"Why, always," replied Hilda, rather surprised by the question. "As far back as I can remember, I have worn this ring, and everyone admires it. Only it is so tight that I can't get it off."

"Yes," said her mother, "that is what I want you to think about. You have worn it ever since you can remember, and in that time you have grown from a little child to a tall girl, and now you are really a woman, yet the ring has never been taken off your finger and

still it has never been too small for you to wear."

Hilda's eyes blazed with excitement as the strangeness of the thing flashed across her mind for the first time in her life. She even turned a little pale, for it seemed quite uncanny. And she had never even thought of it before. This was the strangest of all.

"Why—why—why——" she stammered. "How was it? What does it all mean?"

"Who do you suppose gave you such a ring?" asked her mother quietly.

"Why—I—don't know. I think Alice told me once that it was given me when I was christened."

"Yes, that is true. And now I must tell you really what happened when you were christened—what I saw, and what all four of us who were present saw, though we do not speak of it."

Then Hilda's mother went on to tell the whole story of the christening, just as it has

been told in the first part of this book; and she also told how Lena had tried to steal the ring and had been hurt by some strange power. And then she told what the jeweller had said to her about the gem and about the metal of which the hoop was made.

Hilda listened with astonishment, her eyes opening wider and wider. She uttered little exclamations of surprise as the story went on, and when it was ended, she said:

“Now I see just a little of what the Witch meant when she made me hold my ring up for her and spoke of ‘Magic, magic, more than mine.’”

“Yes, and you remember, dear, I promised to explain it to you some time. Now I have done so, and I am sure that the lady or fairy or whatever she is will make herself known to you when you are eighteen.”

“How wonderful it all is!” said Hilda, still thinking of everything that she had just heard.

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"Of course," said her mother, "it is like a book and is really quite impossible; yet how can I doubt what I have seen myself and what so many saw with me? And after all, it isn't any more wonderful than the Wishes."

"Oh, the Wishes!" exclaimed Hilda. "I had almost forgotten them. They seem like a sort of dream."

"They were no dream," her mother replied, "and you still have two. You promised me not to use them until you were grown up. On your eighteenth birthday the time of your promise ends, and the Wishes are your own. You do not need to ask my leave to use them."

"Oh, dear!" cried Hilda, "isn't it just too exciting! I feel so like a girl in a play. Here I have two Wishes that will bring me anything, and a fairy godmother who may appear at any moment, and a magic ring, and all sorts of delightful things hovering around in the air. I'm crazy to tell somebody all about it."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," cautioned her mother, "because, after all, it may just possibly be a mistake of some kind, and then you would be laughed at."

"Mabel wouldn't laugh," thought Hilda, "and she would believe it."

But she said no more; and, after kissing her mother, went out on the lawn and walked up and down, thinking over everything that she had just learned. She was very much excited. Her face flushed rosy red, and she looked so beautiful that Frieda, who lived in the next house and was watching her from the porch, grew fairly green with envy.

"Conceited minx!" snapped Frieda to herself. "She thinks she looks so fine that she parades up and down the lawn for people in the street to see her. I'd like to take the pride out of her!"

Just then Mabel came riding along the street.

"Oh, Mabel!" cried Hilda, almost scream-

ing with delight. "I'm so glad you've come! There's something that I'm just dying to tell you. Do hurry, for we must have a long, long talk together. It's secrets!"

"Oho!" said Frieda softly to herself. "Secrets, is it? Now what has that stuck-up thing got to tell Mabel? They're a pair. I don't think one of them is any better than the other. They both of them think the ground's not good enough for them to walk on."

Mabel dismounted and told Rex to go around to the stable. Hilda fairly hugged her as she touched the ground.

"Now come with me, this very minute," she said, putting her arm around Mabel's waist.

"We'll go down to the rear lawn in my Bird's Nest, and then I'll tell you a whole lot of things. You are the only girl I know who will really understand."

So they went around the house and down the garden to the rear lawn where Hilda had what she called her "Bird's Nest." It was a

cosy little nook just big enough for two, close to the hedge. A clump of thick shrubs grew there in the shape of a half-moon, making a sort of sheltered alcove, all green leaves and blossoms. Inside it on the turf were two pine-needle cushions. Hilda and Mabel had often sat there together talking, shaded by the leaves and looking out upon the sunlit lawn. Now they hurried to it, and crept under the vines that were trailed across the opening.

You will remember that Frieda's home was next to Hilda's and that their lawns were separated only by a hedge in one place and a fence in another. So when Frieda overheard Hilda say that she had secrets to tell Mabel, and when she saw the two girls go together down the lawn to the Bird's Nest, the thought came into her head to spy upon them and, if possible, to hear what Hilda's secrets were. This was very mean of Frieda, but she was like that. Therefore, as soon as she had watched the two disappear in the leaves, she

began to walk very slyly along her own side of the hedge, taking care to make no noise. In this way she reached a place very near to where Hilda and Mabel were sitting. Between them there was only the hedge and the shrubbery that formed one side of the Bird's Nest.

Frieda sat down on the grass and put her ear against the hedge. She could hear Hilda talking eagerly, and Mabel now and then asking a question. But she could not make out every word that was said, for Hilda spoke sometimes in a low tone of voice, and sometimes the leaves rustled so in the breeze that she could catch only a bit here and a bit there. Still she managed to get some sort of an idea of Hilda's secret, though not exactly the right one. What she did hear made her quiver with jealousy, and grow red with anger. Something very fine was likely to come to Hilda soon. That much Frieda learned. But before she could listen to the very end there was

a rustling in the hedge, and soon after, the face of Towser looked over the top of it. He had been sniffing around for quite a while, for he had an uneasy feeling that someone was about. So he got up on his hind legs and put his paws on the top of the hedge and looked over.

Frieda was startled by his long nose and big paws so near her; and she was afraid that she would be caught listening. So she slunk away quickly into the garden path, and then to her house, where she sat for a long time trying to understand what she had heard. She wanted to do something to hurt Hilda's feelings.

The next day all the girls were at a lawn party—Frieda, Hilda, Marie, and the rest. While they were sitting together in a sort of summer-house eating ices and chatting, Frieda suddenly spoke up in a rather loud voice so that everyone stopped talking to listen.

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“ Oh, Hilda,” said she, “ I hear that you are expecting some very grand lady to come and visit you next week. You think she’ll bring you a lot of beautiful things, don’t you? ”

Hilda was so astonished that she couldn’t answer. She blushed and felt dreadfully embarrassed.

“ But you aren’t quite sure she’ll come, are you? So you haven’t told us. And you think that perhaps she’s your grandmother,—only maybe, after all, she isn’t. Won’t you tell us all about it? ”

Hilda looked up and saw the grin on Frieda’s face.

“ Why, Frieda,” she said. “ I don’t know how you heard any such thing as that.”

“ Oh, news gets about. It must be rather odd not to know who your own grandmother is, and whether she is a grand lady or not. How sad it will be if she turns out to be a very common person! ”

“ Really, Frieda,” said Marie, “ what are

you driving at? It seems as if you were just trying to tease Hilda."

"And I heard a funny thing about that ring of yours," continued Frieda, "the one you're always waving your hand to show off. Was it really a stolen ring? Did one of your nurse-girls steal it from somebody and then your mother took it away from her and gave it to you to wear? Why didn't she give it back to the owner? I'm sure *I* shouldn't like to wear stolen jewellery!"

"Frieda, Frieda!" cried Hilda, rising. "You've got everything all wrong. Nothing is the way you tell it, and you're saying it only to be spiteful. Marie, if you'll excuse me, I'll say good-afternoon."

And she left the summer-house and walked away, very much vexed at the things that Frieda had said.

But Frieda looked after her with a mocking grin, and said to the other girls:

"See how she left as soon as I spoke about

her grandmother and the stolen ring. You may depend upon it, there's something very queer about that girl."

Several of those present, being curious and fond of gossip, crowded around Frieda.

"Oh, tell us what you mean?" they said.

"How did you know about the stolen ring, and what is it about Hilda's grandmother?"

"No, no," answered Frieda, shaking her head with a mysterious air. "I don't care to tell all I know, for I like Hilda, although she *is* so conceited. But I'd rather not say any more."

When the lawn-party was over, a good many of the girls went away with the idea that something unpleasant was about to happen to Hilda, and that Hilda had reason to be ashamed of someone in her family.

And Hilda herself was troubled because Frieda seemed to know a part of the story. How was it all going to turn out?

XI

THE SIX DRESSES

HILDA'S eighteenth birthday dawned with a flood of rosy light. When she came to the breakfast-table it was heaped with roses, and her chair was filled with all kinds of lovely presents, done up in packages of every size and shape; for all her friends had remembered her. It was as good as Christmas, and she couldn't touch a bit of breakfast until she had opened every single package and bundle—large and small, square, round, smooth, and crumply. It was exciting fun, and Hilda gave little cries and squeals of joy as the wrappers came off of each mysterious package.

After all the presents had been piled upon the sideboard where she could look at them

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now and then, she had her breakfast with her father, who usually came down late.

“Now don’t tire yourself out,” said he. “You’ll be up half the night at your birthday party. So take it easy to-day. Besides,” he added with a smile, “you haven’t heard from your godmother yet.”

Hilda grew serious.

“No,” she answered. “And do you know, papa, I had—oh, just the least little hope—that when I woke up I should find something wonderful in my room—that maybe she would be standing beside my bed, or that in some way she would let me know that she was thinking of me.”

“So you really believe in her—and that she was a fairy?”

“Why, yes!” cried Hilda. “Don’t you?”

“Oh, of course. But, then, I believe anything. Besides, you know, I saw her once. Still, perhaps, in these days fairies may not have so much power as they used to

have. It may be harder for them to appear. So I wouldn't set my heart on getting a pailful of diamonds, or a gold automobile, or even on seeing the—er—lady at all."

"Oh," said Hilda, "I wasn't thinking about any presents, but I *did* think that she would at least come to me and let me really speak with her."

"Well," said her father, "she might possibly come to your party this evening—only you haven't sent her any invitation, not knowing her name and address. 'Miss or Mrs. —, *Fairyland*.' That's rather indefinite. By the way, I wonder whether fairies are Miss or Mrs., or sometimes one and sometimes the other. Do your books say anything about married fairies?"

"You're just making fun of it all!" said Hilda pretending to pout—a most adorable little pout. "Yes, I've read of a King of the Fairies as well as a Queen of the Fairies."

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And don't you remember Oberon and Titania in Shakespeare?"

"Oh, bother Shakespeare!" said her father. "I hate Shakespeare for breakfast. Cut me off another bit of the steak, please. It's the noblest steak I ever saw. Now, when I was in the Mexican War——"

"Papa!" cried Hilda, throwing a rose at him and running out of the room. When her father began talking about the Mexican War she knew that he wanted to be left alone to read his newspaper over his breakfast, which was a very bad habit of his. But neither she nor her mother could ever break him of it.

She went out on the lawn and sat down under a tree to think about her birthday party. It was the first evening party that she had ever given and she wanted it to go off beautifully. She went over all the arrangements that she and her mother had made—the musicians, the flowers, the favours for the dancing, the supper,—in fact, everything. All

her friends had been asked and they had all accepted. Since the lawn-party, she had not seen Frieda to speak to, and had tried not to see her. Yet when she came to send out the invitations, she sent one to Frieda, too. She did not wish to think that anyone was her enemy, and she herself had forgiven Frieda for the mean things that she had said. And Frieda sent word that she was coming.

So the morning passed away. After luncheon, Hilda went to her room for a little nap, and when she woke she heard sounds in the rooms below where the workmen were putting up the decorations and waxing the floor for dancing.

“I’ll go out in the garden,” thought Hilda, “and see if they have taken the right flowers.”

The garden was in the rear of the house and was divided by a long, narrow path that led to the back lawn. On each side of the path was a low hedge and beyond the hedges

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were beds of flowers. No one was there; so Hilda walked slowly down the path, looking carefully at the flowers. When she reached the end, she stopped and stood for a moment in the sunshine. Her eyes rested upon the greensward of the lawn before her when—all of a sudden there was someone there, standing in front of her, where a second before there had been nobody!

It was a lady dressed in a silvery, shimmering grey—tall and stately and with a wonderful face, and eyes that made you feel that you must mind her, no matter what she said. Hilda fairly gasped, for the lady had appeared to her so quickly.

“Hilda,” said she, in a voice that was like the sweetest music, “do you know me?”

“Yes,” answered Hilda, for she knew at once. “Yes. You must be my godmother.”

The Fairy smiled.

“I am, indeed, your godmother,” said she, “and you have believed in me and have ex-

pected me. It is only foolish people who will not believe in fairies. I have watched you ever since you were a little child, and now I have come to you as I promised long ago when your name was given you by me, with the ring you wear."

"It is so good to see you really," answered Hilda; for there was something that made her love the Fairy as soon as she had heard her speak.

"I have come on your birthday," continued the Fairy, "and I shall come again on your wedding-day. And that is very soon."

"Oh!" gasped Hilda, in astonishment.

"Yes," said the Fairy. "Go to your mother and tell her that one week from this very day at sunset you are to be married, and that she is to make ready."

"But, but," stammered Hilda, "I—I don't—I don't believe—— Why—whom am I to marry?"

"One week from this very day, at sunset,"

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said the Fairy, looking Hilda in the eyes, "there will come the Prince who lives in his palace beyond the Shining Mountains. He it is whom you will marry."

"But," said Hilda, greatly surprised, though she could not doubt the Fairy, "I never heard of him. I never saw him."

"It matters not," replied the Fairy, with a beautiful smile. "I am his godmother as well as yours. I have meant you for each other. When once you speak to him and when once he speaks to you, it will be as though you had known him all your life. For this, my child, is the miracle of true love. When true lovers meet—a day, an hour, a minute even, are the same as many years. You will know that you were meant for him, and he will know that he was meant for you. So do not fear and do not doubt, but go now and give my message to your mother."

Hilda was too dazed to speak. The Fairy paused for a moment and then went on:

“Your mother,” she said, “may think that you only dreamed all this. I will give you a sign that it is true. Close your right hand except your little finger.”

Hilda did so, wondering.

“Now open it.”

Hilda opened her right hand, and there in the palm of it lay an exquisite pearl, lustrous and finer than any pearl that she had ever seen.

“Oh, how beautiful!” cried she.

“Now,” said the Fairy, “carry my message to your mother, and if she doubts, give her this sign by making other pearls appear as this one has. Tell me, will you do exactly as I say? It is for your happiness.”

Hilda looked up and saw the Fairy’s eyes fixed upon her with a gaze which seemed to go straight through her.

“Yes,” she answered, as though in a dream.

“I will do exactly as you say.”

And even as she spoke, though she was

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looking intently at the Fairy—there was no one there.

Hilda's mind was full of puzzled, anxious thoughts. Her knees trembled so she could scarcely walk. Yet, with it all, she was happy in a strange, new way. Everything in the world seemed to be changed. Just then she heard a loud voice near her.

“Well, Hilda! Have you been day-dreaming? Why were you talking to yourself so queerly?”

It was Frieda, who suddenly leaned over the hedge and looked on her in a mocking sort of way. She was the last person in the world whom Hilda wished to see. But she drew herself up and tried not to look as if anything unusual had happened.

“Talking to yourself!” repeated Frieda. “Are you practising a piece?”

“You're quite mistaken, Frieda. I wasn't talking to myself. I was talking to a—a lady.”

“Well, that’s pretty good!” said Frieda, laughing loudly. “I saw you all the time, and there wasn’t anyone near you. I couldn’t hear what you said, but you seemed to be talking to the air. You’re not going on the stage, are you?”

“You didn’t see right,” said Hilda. “And please excuse me, for I have to go in and see about the arrangements for my party.”

“Very well,” said Frieda, with a short laugh. “I suppose you think that no one ever had such a party before!”

But Hilda was already entering the house, where she found her mother in her own room, talking with Aunt Maria, who had just arrived.

Hilda was too excited to mind Aunt Maria, and burst out with the news.

“Oh, *what* do you think happened?” she cried. “I’ve seen my godmother—in the garden!”

“The Fairy?” asked her mother.

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“That—female?” asked Aunt Maria, with a sniff.

“Yes, the Fairy, and she talked with me and gave me a message for you.”

And then Hilda told the whole story. Her mother heard it with deep interest, but Aunt Maria kept sniffing all the time.

“The child has been dreaming,” she said, when it was all told. “She’s always been a fanciful sort of girl and you’ve put notions into her head that make her imagine things.”

“And the Fairy gave me this beautiful pearl,” said Hilda, not paying any attention to Aunt Maria.

They both looked at the pearl as Hilda held it out to them. No one could doubt that it was indeed a pearl.

“Pshaw!” said Aunt Maria. “The child found it and imagined all the rest.” She never liked to call Hilda by her name, because the name was not Maria.

“But see,” continued Hilda, “the Fairy

thought you might not believe, and so she gave me the power of showing you a sign. Look!"

She closed her right hand, all except her little finger, and then opened it. In her palm there lay a second pearl, exactly like the first. She repeated this many times, until a whole cupful of shimmering pearls lay in her mother's lap. Aunt Maria had not a word to say, but sat there staring with her mouth wide open.

Hilda's mother looked very much perplexed. Finally she said:

"Hilda, dear, this is a very, very serious thing. I must talk with your father about it. But for the present do not mention it, even to Mabel. You are so young, and it is all so strange and unexpected. What is your own wish about this Prince?"

"Oh," said Hilda, very demurely, "I—I don't know. I think that you and papa will know best."

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“Very well,” said her mother. “But I am not in favour of it myself.”

“I should think not!” cried Aunt Maria, finding her voice at last. “I never heard of such a thing! Prince, indeed! You should wait four or five years at least; and then, if you turn out to be a good, steady, sound-minded girl, you may get a husband of whom you can be proud—someone like my Clarence. In fact, Clarence thinks quite well of you now, though I must say that you would have to be much more practical before *I* should think of such a match for him.”

Hilda's face grew very red. She could not bear Clarence, and what Aunt Maria said made her almost hate him. So she left the room and went up to her own, where she locked the door and thought of many things. But she thought most of all about the Prince from beyond the Shining Mountains.

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Hilda's party was a dream. The lawn was

strung with coloured lanterns, and the whole house blazed with light. All of Hilda's friends were there—Mabel, of course, and Marie and the other girls; and Walter and even Tubby, though he was not yet really old enough to go to a grown-up party. But Hilda had asked him because she liked him so much, though everyone still called him Tubby. Clarence came, too, and was much pleased with his suit of evening clothes and with a small moustache which he had grown. He kept twisting it all the time to make others notice it, though it wasn't very much of a moustache, after all. And Frieda came, hoping to find something to make fun of afterwards.

Hilda was dressed in simple white and looked more beautiful than ever in her life. The only ornament she wore was about her neck; for she had strung the Fairy's pearls on a white silk cord, and they glowed and shimmered in the most wonderful way.

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The house was filled with light and life and music and the sound of merry laughter as the dance went on. At midnight, supper was served, and just a few minutes before the time, Hilda, her father, and her mother went forward to a little alcove opposite the doors that were to be opened very soon.

"It has been such a lovely evening," said Hilda, looking at the couples that were waltzing to the strains of dreamy music.

"Yes," said her father, "and this is the end of the last dance, for it must be now the very hour of midnight."

As he spoke, the clear notes of a bugle were heard from without, high above the music of the dance. A moment later came the sound of horses' hoofs, and then firm footsteps in the hall. The door opened and two stately gentlemen entered, bowing as they did so. The first, though old, was as straight as an arrow, and more than six feet in height. His bronzed face was partly

covered by a heavy white moustache, and he had an air of splendid grace and breeding. With him came a somewhat younger gentleman, smooth-shaven and alert. Both wore uniforms of dark blue, laced with silver, and on their breasts were a score of jewelled stars and crosses. By their sides hung swords in silver scabbards. They had white leather boots that reached almost to their waists, with golden spurs gleaming at their heels. Each carried in his hand a silver helmet.

The elder gentleman looked swiftly around the room, with a keen glance, and then went straight to where Hilda's father stood beside her. He bowed low, and said:

"Sir, permit me to announce myself. I have the honour to be Master of the Palace to His Highness, Prince Caryl. My companion, whom I beg to present to you, is the Master of the Prince's Horse."

"It gives me pleasure to welcome you, gentlemen," said Hilda's father, who knew how

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to speak at such a time. For, though he was fond of joking, he could be very serious.

“I have the honour,” said the Master of the Palace, “to ask, on behalf of His Highness, the hand of your daughter, the Lady Hilda. I think, sir, you have learned already of the hope which my princely master entertains.”

“I have,” replied Hilda’s father, “but I am not yet prepared to give an answer to His Highness. I must ask that you let me reflect for a somewhat longer time.”

The Master of the Palace looked deeply disappointed. He bowed again, and half turned to speak with his companion. Just then Hilda’s father felt a little pull at his sleeve, and there was Hilda blushing very much, but looking very earnest.

“Papa,” she whispered, “don’t you think that—that—that perhaps the Fairy knows best?”

Then she hid behind him, and buried her

face in a great cluster of white roses which she carried.

"I trust, sir," resumed the Master of the Palace, "that you will not refuse. His Highness is everything that you could wish, and"—he lowered his voice—"and a—a lady in grey—the godmother of your daughter—has given her consent."

Hilda's father spoke with a voice of decision:

"Then," said he, "do I give mine. Be pleased to carry back my answer to His Highness."

He turned to the whole company, who had stood at a distance, wondering what was taking place:

"I announce," said he, "the coming marriage of my daughter, Hilda, to His Highness, Prince Caryl, from beyond the Shining Mountains. And I ask you all to be present at the marriage, here, at sunset, one week from this very night!"

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A buzz of excitement filled the room. Everyone began exclaiming, "Hilda is to be a Princess!"

Then the Master of the Palace knelt before Hilda, and offered her a small gold casket, marvellously embossed and ornamented.

"Accept this, lady," he said, "from Prince Caryl, with the devotion of his heart and soul."

Hilda took the casket and opened it. It was lined with dark blue velvet, upon which lay a ring set with a single diamond,—such a diamond as no one there had ever seen. It sparkled and blazed and glittered like ice and fire.

"Oh!" gasped Hilda. "It is my engagement ring. I must put it on this minute—— But I can't!" she added in dismay. "The Fairy's ring is on that finger, and it can never be taken off."

She looked quite piteous, for how could

she wear an engagement ring on any other finger except the real one? In her perplexity she caught at the Fairy's ring and began to twist it in despair, when—lo and behold!—off it came as easily as any ring you ever saw! She gave a little cry of joy, and slipped on the new ring, while she placed the Fairy's ring upon the fourth finger of her right hand.

The music burst forth, and everyone present made a rush at Hilda. Mabel threw her arms around her neck and Marie caught her hands and kissed them.

"You two shall be my bridesmaids," cried Hilda.

"My eye!" said Tubby. "A Princess! I say, Hilda, you are coming on!"

Only Frieda held back. It was as if she had swallowed some bitter medicine. She could not say a word of congratulation, but, while the rest were crowding around, and while the two gentlemen from the Prince's

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Palace were taking their leave, she slipped away and went home, where she lay awake all night, gritting her teeth in envious anger.

When everyone had gone, and the house was closed, and the lights were out except a very few, Hilda's mother drew a long breath, and said:

"Well, darling, what *do* you think of it?"

Now, Hilda thought many things all to herself; but she was now a woman, and so she said only one thing—which, after all, was what a woman would very likely say:

"Why, mamma," she answered, "I think, as there's only a week, it will be as much as we can do to get my clothes made."

And her mother quite agreed. But her father just kissed her, and didn't ask her any questions.

The next day they had dressmakers from the city, and the house was full of sewing-women and milliners and people from the

shops, until Hilda's father locked himself up in his Den, and poked a little note out under the door to say that if they really needed the Den, too, he would go up and live upon the roof. But no one paid much attention to him, for he was nothing but a Man.

It was Hilda's mother who took charge of everything.

"You are going to be a Princess," she said to Hilda; "and you will have everything that is fine and beautiful in your palace. It isn't any use for us to try to prepare such clothes as a Princess would wear. We must simply do the best we can in this short time, and give you just what we should give you if you were going to marry a private gentleman."

So by great pains and by having the women sew every evening, they finished a trousseau for Hilda. Apart from the simple clothes which she already had, they made her six very handsome dresses. The first was

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her wedding dress—all white, of lace and silk and chiffon, and so pretty that all of Hilda's friends fairly jumped up and down when they saw it. Then there was a lovely dress of pale rose, and another of pale blue, and a fawn-coloured travelling dress, and two dresses, one of voile and one of crêpe de Chine. The last was not finished until the night before the wedding day, and then all of Hilda's friends were asked to come and see them as they hung in the wardrobe in her room. They had a merry time together, looking at the dresses and the other pretty things. Everyone was greatly excited over the coming marriage, and all of them wished Hilda joy, except Frieda, who was eaten up by jealousy. Her face was the colour of lead, and when she spoke to Hilda she stammered and mixed her words all up, for she felt as though she were choking.

That night she tossed and turned in bed,

and scarcely slept a wink. It seemed to her so unfair that Hilda should have so many pretty dresses, and that all the girls should be so glad, and that she should have been chosen to marry a Prince. What made it all the harder to bear was that, though Frieda herself had done so many mean things to Hilda, and had tried to make her unhappy, Hilda had always been polite and kind to her, and had never done any mean things back.

“Oh, how I wish I could shame her in some way!” cried Frieda to herself, as she tossed about in bed.

And the next morning she could eat nothing, but moved about looking sullen and heavy-eyed. She went out and sat in her porch, brooding over her anger, and watching Hilda's windows like a panther.

The hours went by until it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and still Frieda sat there, biting her nails. Presently she saw

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Hilda's father and mother come out and drive away in a carriage.

"Huh!" said Frieda, "I suppose they've gone to see the clergyman."

Soon after, Hilda herself appeared, and walked quickly up the street toward the village.

"There's something she's forgotten," thought Frieda, "and she's gone to buy it."

Then, like lightning, a thought darted into her mind. Hilda's house was empty except for the servants, and they would be very busy on the lower floor.

"I could step into the door at the side porch," thought Frieda, "and go up the stairs to her room where she has all her fine things. Even if someone met me, they wouldn't think anything about it. Hm—m!"

Her thoughts flashed swiftly through her brain.

"I'll do it!" she cried aloud. "I'll spoil her old wedding!"

She hurried into her own house, and pretty soon she came out again with a large paper bag. With it she went swiftly around the hedge and into the side-porch of Hilda's house and up the stairs. Everything was very quiet. There were two great travelling trunks, and on the bureau and the table were scattered all sorts of things which had not yet been packed.

"I hope she hasn't packed her dresses yet," muttered Frieda.

But no. When she opened the wardrobe there were the six dresses still hanging there—the wedding dress of lace and silk and chiffon, the pale rose dress, and the pale blue dress, and the travelling dress of fawn colour, and the two dresses of voile and crêpe de Chine.

"Aha!" cried Frieda, grinning with delight, "now I have *my* chance."

Out of the paper bag she took a long ink-bottle, nearly full of ink, and a slender paint-

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brush. She uncorked the bottle and dipped the brush deep in the ink.

“There!” she said, as she gave the lace and chiffon a great splash with the dripping ink. She drew the brush back and forth across the lovely dress until, from the neck to the hem of the skirt, it looked like a dirty pen-wiper.

“Ha, ha!” laughed Frieda, chuckling over the ruin. “Now for the next one!”

And, taking fresh dips, she smeared the pale rose dress with ink, and then the pale blue, and then the fawn-coloured travelling dress, until they, too, were ruined. The two filmy black dresses she also inked, but because the ink did not show so much on them she took a pair of scissors and cut great slashes in them, besides. When she had finished she gave one look at the poor, ink-stained clothes on which so much labour had been spent. Then she hastily closed the wardrobe and slipped quietly down the stairs.



Frieda Inks the Dresses

“I think Miss Hilda will have a nice little surprise when she begins to dress,” she thought to herself.

She was trembling with excitement as she glided back to her own house and up into her bedroom. But she was glad, for she had ruined all of Hilda's wedding clothes. And nobody had seen her.

XII

THE PRINCE ARRIVES

AT four o'clock Hilda went up to her room, to look things over for the last time. At five the maids were to begin doing her hair and dressing her, but she wanted to be alone until then. It was so hard to believe that in a few hours she would no longer be in the home where she had lived ever since she was a little child. But she was strangely happy, for she felt that the Fairy knew what was best for her; and she could not help being proud in an innocent, girlish way, because she was going to be a Princess.

She went about the room as if to say good-bye to everything. She patted the white pillows, and touched her books, and spoke to the pictures in the room as if they understood.

“Good-bye, all of you,” she said. “But

I'll come back sometimes to see you, and you mustn't think that I'll forget you."

Then she looked at herself in the mirror and saw in it the reflection of a lovely face, with flushed cheeks, and hair that tumbled about her forehead in a most bewitching manner.

"Dear me!" she said. "They'll have a dreadful time doing my hair!"

Then she held her engagement ring to the light and watched the diamond sparkle. As she did so, she suddenly turned from the window and kissed the ring in a shy little way.

"Now!" said she. "One more look at my wedding dress."

She opened the wardrobe wide, and the rays of the afternoon sun shone full into its recesses. Oh, horrors! What a sight she saw! Her wedding dress, that had been so dainty and so white, was one ugly mass of ink-stains. The lace was dabbled with black

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smears. The silk and chiffon were all dingy and bedaubed. And the other five dresses were almost worse. Every one of them was inked from top to bottom, and two of them were slashed and had great rents in them.

Hilda gave a wail of grief and fright, and then burst into tears.

“Oh, who has done this?” she cried. “All my lovely dresses are ruined! And the Prince is to come at sunset. What shall I do? What *shall* I do?”

She wrung her hands and sobbed so that she could scarcely speak.

“And my other dresses are all packed—and, anyway, there isn’t any wedding dress among them. No girl could be married in a shirtwaist—and—oh, what will the Prince think? I can’t see him when he comes. I must give him up. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!”

The church clock struck the third quarter-hour. Its chime made Hilda leap to her feet.

“Ah!” she cried. “I have my Wishes!

It is right to use one now, for this is not just a child's trouble. *I will!*"

She left off sobbing, and her eyes sparkled.

"Oh, if only it is still true, and the Elf has not forgotten!"

She closed the wardrobe, shutting out the sight of the ink-stained dresses. Then she said aloud: "I wish for six of the most beautiful dresses that anyone ever saw."

And having said this she uttered the words that she had not spoken for so many years:

"Little elf, little elf,
Come to me your ownty self,
Make my spoken wish come true,
As you said that you would do."

Ting! came a sound like that of a tiny silver bell. Hilda flew to the wardrobe and threw its doors wide open. What she saw made her fairly gasp with wonder and delight. The inky dresses were all gone, and in place of them were six dresses, such as she had never even dreamed of. The wed-

ding dress was covered with lace, but it was finer lace than human hands could ever make, for it came from the fingers of the Elves. Beside it, even the choicest rose-point would have seemed coarse and cheap. And the dress itself, though it was something like silk, was of an exquisite fabric which shimmered as if woven out of moonlight. Indeed, it all seemed like fairy cobweb and starshine, and the beauty of it entranced the eyes of Hilda, so that she could only gaze and gaze and gaze, as if she were in a dream.

I cannot try to describe the other dresses. Each in its way was as marvellous as the wedding dress itself. The six were just a vision of loveliness—rose-leaf, and blue sky and the glimmer of light in a clear pool, all seemed to have taken form in these elfin garments.

“Oh, you dear, *dear* Elf!” cried Hilda at last, clapping her hands and dancing with joy.

But just then a knock was heard at the door, and one of the maids put her head in.

“It’s four o’clock. May we come to dress you now, Miss Hilda?”

.

Just before sunset, all of Hilda’s friends had gathered in the drawing-room, which was banked with flowers. Two heavy curtains shut off the end near the staircase down which the bride would come. There was a buzz of talk, for everybody was very much excited. Back in one corner stood Frieda, very silent and with her lips pressed tight together. But her eyes shone and her heart beat fast, for now, she told herself, she was going to shame Hilda before all of those who knew her, and perhaps even keep her from marrying the Prince.

“She can’t get married in her old duds,” thought Frieda, “and I’ve taken care that she hasn’t got anything better.”

She grinned to herself as she thought of

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how she had splashed the ink on Hilda's wedding dress. No one had seen her do it. She was quite safe. And now she was to have her fun. "She won't ever put on any airs again!" muttered Frieda.

"What are you muttering about, Frieda?" asked Tubby, who was wandering around with an enormous rose in his buttonhole. He was still rather young to be asked to a wedding, for he was only fourteen, but Hilda liked him so much that she wished him to be there.

"You don't look happy," Tubby went on. "Maybe you wanted to be a bridesmaid. Or maybe the bride—eh? Well, cheer up, and don't mull over it. I shouldn't wonder if Clarence might fall in love with you some day. And he's a lot better than a Prince—or he thinks he is, anyhow."

"Let me alone!" snapped Frieda. "Prince, indeed! It'd be a good joke on Hilda if her Prince didn't come, after all. I

have a sort of feeling that something is going to happen to this wonderful wedding."

"Well," said Tubby blandly, stroking his big rose, "if the Prince doesn't come, the wedding can go right on just the same. I'll take his place. I've been thinking of marriage for some time, and Hilda is the right sort. So you see, it'll be a good thing all around if the Prince doesn't come."

Just then the sun sank below the hills, and the lights in the house all began to shine out brilliantly. At the same instant, a long strain of distant music floated clear and sweet on the still evening air. Those guests who were nearest the great bay-window looked eagerly toward the east, and there, winding down the hillside, came what seemed to be a stream of fire. In a few moments they could make out the figures of a long train of horsemen riding toward the house. Many of the horsemen bore flaming torches. At the

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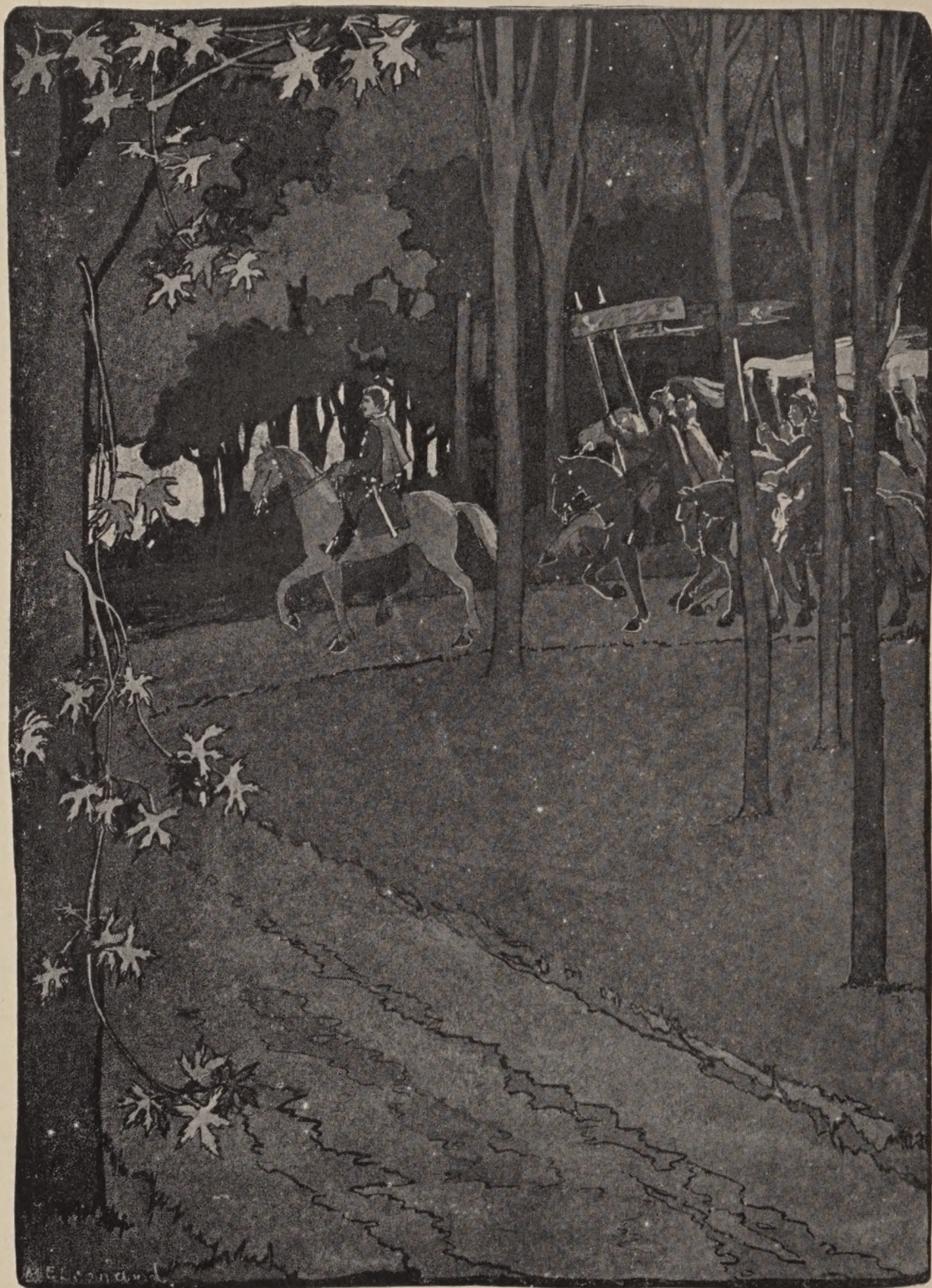
head of them rode a youth, gallant of bearing, and sitting his horse like a soldier.

“The Prince! The Prince!” so went the word around.

The heavy curtains parted and the clergyman who had christened Hilda entered. Then, no one could tell how, there came into the room a tall and stately lady, dressed in silvery grey. She stood beside the clergyman, and he seemed to know her, for they spoke together. Aunt Maria gave a sudden gasp.

Then there was the trampling of many horses without, and the sharp word of command given by the officers. And finally into the room was ushered a handsome young man with thick golden hair, and a joyous look in his dark eyes. He was tall and athletic, and every movement was full of grace. With him came six noblemen in blue and silver, the first of whom was to be his groomsman.

The tall lady in silvery grey came forward to greet him; and he, too, seemed to know



The Prince Arrives

her. She led him to the clergyman, and there he paused, while a hush came over the crowded room.

“Now,” chuckled Frieda, under her breath, “here is the Prince, but where is Hilda? She can’t come down! She can’t come down!”

At this very instant, from a hidden orchestra, came the strange, slow, thrilling music of the Wedding March. The heavy curtains glided apart; and there, leaning on her father’s arm, was Hilda, radiantly beautiful and seeming to float amid a pure white filmy mass of elfin lace. Behind her were Mabel and Marie, her bridesmaids. Each wore a bracelet of emeralds and diamonds which the Prince had sent them.

The service proceeded until the last word of it was spoken. Then, outside the house, there flashed forth a thousand torches, and a tremendous burst of joyful music made the heavens ring. Within, for a few moments, the guests remained in their places while the

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Prince turned to Hilda and kissed her very tenderly.

“You have never seen me before,” said he, “but I have seen you often in my dreams. You do not find it strange?”

Hilda looked into his clear honest eyes and smiled. “I think that my—our—godmother knows a great deal,” she said. “What she told me is quite true.”

“And what did she tell you?” asked the Prince eagerly.

“Oh, never mind,” said Hilda, blushing a little. “It was something good.”

They chatted for a moment and then the Prince turned to Hilda’s father and mother.

“She will still be yours,” said he. “For my palace is as much yours as it is mine.”

“We shall come to see it,” said Hilda’s father. “Really, it’s a long time since I lived in palaces. When I was in the Mexican War——”

“Papa!” cried Hilda, giving him a pat on

his cheek, "You shouldn't tell fibs at such a time."

Finally all the guests came forward to wish Hilda happiness and to meet the Prince. He had a pleasant word for everyone, and was in high spirits, as well he might be, for he had the loveliest bride that ever was.

"And who is this gentleman?" asked the Prince of Hilda.

It was quite a young gentleman with an enormous rose in his buttonhole. He seemed quite at his ease and had a cheerful grin.

"Why, this is Tubby," said Hilda, laughing. "No, he hasn't any other name and never will have, I think. He is one of my best friends."

The Prince gave him a hearty grip of the hand.

"I say, Prince," said Tubby, "you know I rather expected to marry Hilda—er—that is to say the Princess, myself. It's rather a facer to lose her in this sudden way."

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“Oh,” returned the Prince, smiling, “but, you see, Hilda has always belonged to me—both ways—backward to the day that she was born, and forward so long as we shall live. But you will learn to bear it, I fancy. And, by the way, don’t forget to come before long to my palace, just beyond the Shining Mountains. There will be horses for you to ride, and huntsmen to take you shooting, and boats, and other things that may interest you. Come and try them. They are yours whenever you care for them.”

Tubby’s eyes glistened with pleasure.

“Prince!” said he.

“What is it?” asked the Prince.

“You are all right!” answered Tubby.

“And so are you!” said the Prince, laughing, and clapping Tubby on the shoulder.

Clarence had been listening to this with much disgust. He was greatly overcome at the thought of meeting a Prince, and he was shocked to hear Tubby speak so freely. So

he came forward bowing and scraping, and fingering his sandy moustache.

“Er—if your Royal Highness please,” he said, “I’m her Royal Highness’s cousin. I hope your Royal Highness will pardon the boy Tubby for not understanding the proper way in which to speak to your Royal Highness. He doesn’t know how they talk in courts, your Royal Highness.”

The Prince looked at Clarence for a moment, and slightly raised his eyebrows.

“Indeed,” he answered gravely, “then perhaps *I* don’t know either; for Tubby seemed to me to speak exactly as a gentleman should speak.”

Clarence was much confused and shrank away; and just then Hilda, looking around, remarked:

“I think that everyone has congratulated me now, except Frieda. Where is Frieda? I thought I saw her here when I came in.”

“Yes, she was here,” said one of the other

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girls. "But she went away suddenly. She said that she was very sick."

.

The time had come for Hilda to put on her travelling dress. She slipped upstairs with her mother, and before very long she came down the winding stairs. All her friends had gathered there, and the Prince stood waiting for her. The outer doors were flung wide open, and everyone started with surprise. The house seemed surrounded by a sea of fire. A thousand horsemen with blazing torches were massed before it, and as Hilda and the Prince appeared in the doorway a great outburst of music came from the musicians.

"Long live the Prince and Princess!" roared a thousand voices.

There was a beautiful carriage drawn by six milk-white horses, at the lower steps. As Hilda entered it, Tubby threw half a bushel of rice down upon her and the Prince. The carriage-door closed, and the horses

started off at a brisk trot, yet not so fast but that a white satin slipper thrown by Marie fell upon the coachman's seat. The thousand horsemen quickly formed in columns and rode at a distance behind the carriage, on into the darkness of the night, in which their torches flashed and flamed.

For a long while Hilda sat in silence beside the Prince, as the carriage moved smoothly over the road that led to the Shining Mountains. At last she said:

"I've read in my books that when a girl marries, she ought to bring her husband something. You never asked about it, and maybe you think that I have nothing to bring you. But I have, and it's something more than most girls have."

"I'm sure it's something more than any other girl has," said the Prince, looking at Hilda's lovely face in the half-light.

"Yes," said Hilda, not understanding what he meant. "It is a Wish."

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“A wish?” asked the Prince, who now in his turn did not understand.

“Yes, a Wish. I must tell you all about it.”

So Hilda told the Prince the story of the Elf, and of how he had given her five Wishes, and how four of them had now been used.

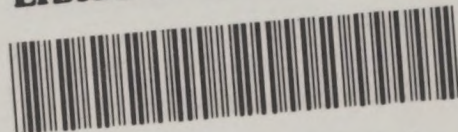
“But,” she said as she finished, “I have one Wish left, and with it I can bring you anything you’d like to have.”

The Prince made no answer for a little while. Then he drew Hilda gently to him.

“So you have one Wish, have you, dear?” he asked. “Well, so have I one wish, just one great wish—the wish to make you happy. And,” he added, “I hope that I shall make you so very happy that you will have nothing else to wish for in the whole wide world.”

THE END

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